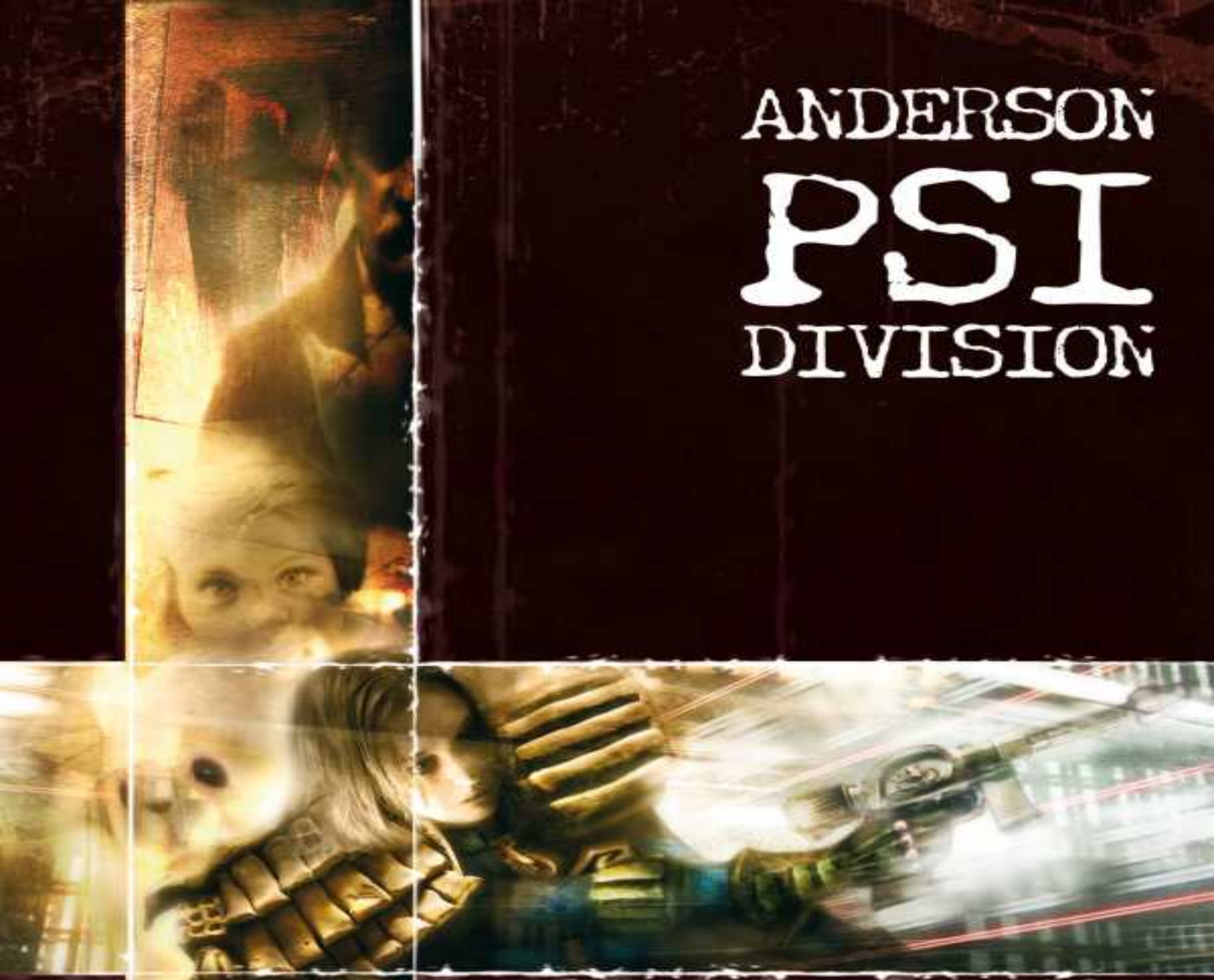
ANDERSON

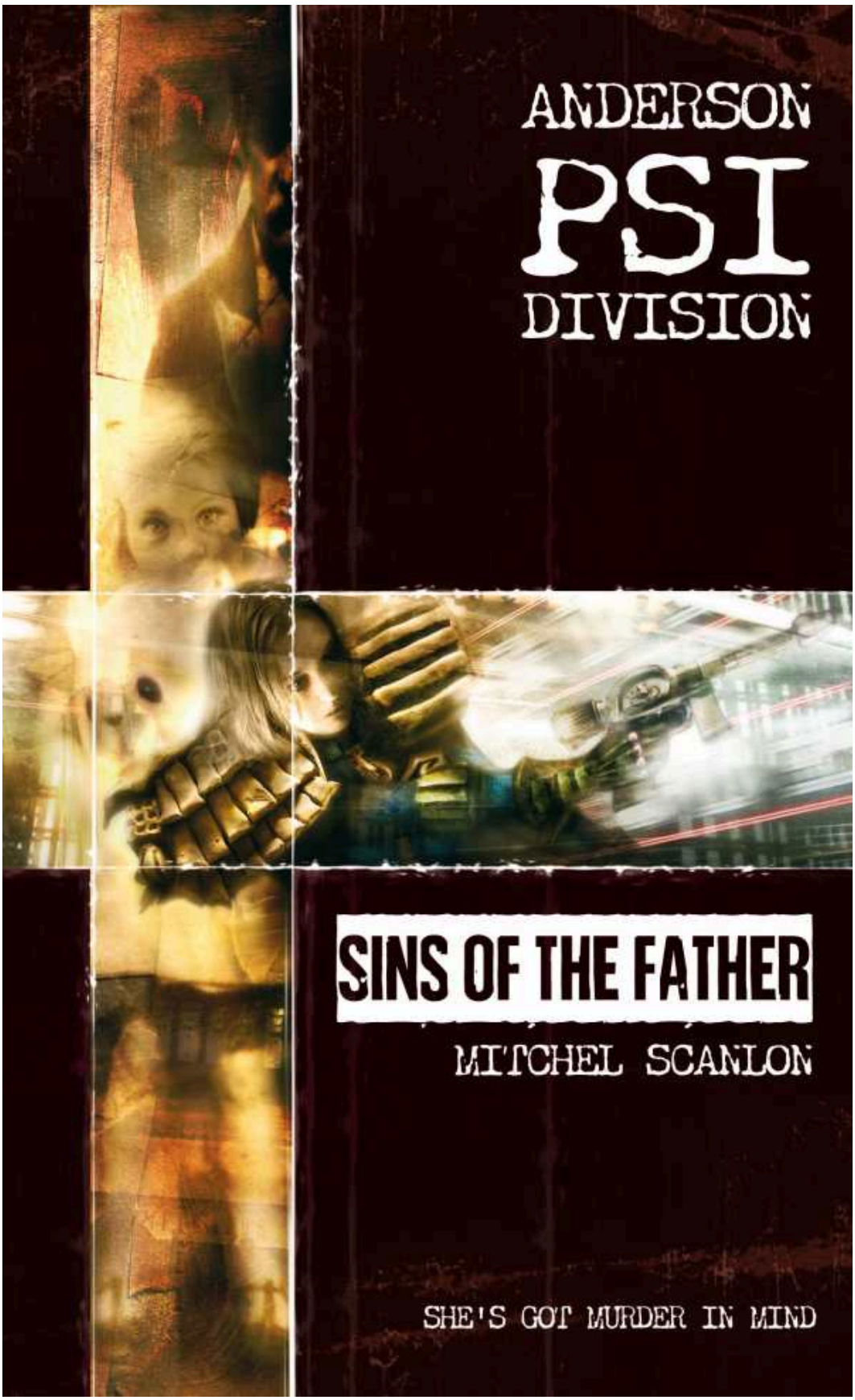
PSI DIVISION



SINS OF THE FATHER

MITCHEL SCANLON

SHE'S GOT MURDER IN MIND


ANDERSON
PSI
DIVISION
SINS OF THE FATHER
MITCHEL SCANLON
SHE'S GOT MURDER IN MIND

To Matt Ralphs - read contract you must, young Jedi.

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ANDERSON PSI DIVISION

It is the year 2126. Atomic war has decimated humanity, and the world is a bleak wasteland, inhabited by mutants and freaks. Most people live in vast, walled cities that keep the lethal winds and foul inhabitants outside at bay; after all, the cities have enough problems of their own to deal with. Boredom is endemic, unemployment is sky high and so is the crime rate, as the cramped Meg citizens strive to survive any way they can. As the population booms and tensions rise, the authorities know that they must use an iron fist to keep the teeming millions in check.

In Mega-City One, home to four hundred million, the Law is king. Justice is upheld by the implacable Judges - empowered to act as judge, jury and executioner - and intent on sending criminals to jail or an early grave. But a new threat is emerging. Radioactivity slowly works its insidious voodoo on the population, warping not just flesh, but also minds. People with dangerous talents stalk the shadows: telekinetics, pyromaniacs, telepaths and psychos. Some seek to use their talents for criminal ends and others try to hide them, fearful of recrimination. Whatever the case, in the eyes of the Law, they are all criminals, and they need bringing in!

It is Psi Division's task to do what the regular Judges cannot: deal with supernatural phenomena and hunt mutant psychics down! Its ranks are comprised of powerful telepaths and psychics, able to scan minds and psychometrically "read" bodies and crime scenes. Foremost in this elite cadrÈ is Psi-Judge Cassandra Anderson: sassy, dedicated and hard as nails. Psi-flashes enable her to sense danger and near-future events and she can even read the minds of the recently deceased. In the fractious, urban nightmare of the future, she'll need all her talent and tenacity not just to uphold the Law, but to stay alive!

ANDERSON PSI DIVISION

SINS OF THE FATHER

Mitchel Scanlon

PROLOGUE

THE EVIL THAT MEN DO

Brandy. At first he could hardly believe it. The old man had real brandy.

Lifting the decanter from inside the open drinks cabinet, Dr Richard Langstock poured another generous measure. A tingling mellow warmth spread through his chest as he sipped from his glass. When he had arrived at the penthouse apartment in the Charles Foster Kane building the butler had led him to a comfortable sitting room and asked him to wait, adding as an afterthought that the doctor should feel free to help himself to a drink. Anxious about his impending meeting with the old man, Langstock had duly obliged. The brandy's fire helped soothe his nerves. The meeting tonight was important. If things went well, long-cherished dreams and ambitions lay within his grasp. If things went poorly however...

Brandy. Real brandy. Langstock had never experienced the genuine article before, but the taste was unmistakeable. Distracted, his thoughts strayed briefly to the implications inherent in the glass he held before him. As one of the most sought-after specialists in his field, his talents highly regarded across his profession, he had become accustomed to a certain quality of living. Yet the contents of the glass in his hand spoke of so much more. The mere fact the old man was wealthy enough to be able to offer real brandy to his guests suggested a level of prosperity so far above Langstock's own it almost made him dizzy. There was nothing on the decanter to identify the brandy's origin, but Langstock knew no one had manufactured the real thing since before the Great Atom War over fifty years ago. Like almost everything else in the modern world, the wines and spirits of the past had been replaced by synthetic alternatives. The brandy he was drinking could well date from the Twentieth century or earlier: each rare and exquisite mouthful worth more than his entire salary for the year. Even half-full, the decanter might still contain enough to fund a new endowment at the hospital; an additional research grant perhaps, or some brand-new equipment for his department.

Savouring the thought with a quiet smile, Langstock took another drink.

The room around him spoke as eloquently of wealth and power as the old man's stock of spirits. Though no expert, Langstock could see the sitting room's furnishings and fixtures were all antique. Oak panelling covered

every surface of the walls, three sumptuously upholstered armchairs stood around a small inlaid table, boldly patterned rugs and a thickly piled carpet decorated the floor: all in real woods, silks and velvets, without a trace of the cheap mass-produced synthetics with which most of the citizens of Mega-City One were forced to make do. Inspecting the gilt-framed portraits which hung from the walls, he saw a series of mawkishly sentimental studies of wide-eyed children dressed in urchin rags - each apparently an actual museum piece painted in oils rather than the digitally recreated facsimiles he would have expected. No matter his opinion of the old man's taste in art, it was clear the paintings were likely worth millions of credits. The only nod to modernity in the room was a holo-fire that sat in the hearth beneath an imposing marble mantelpiece, its flickering flames and recorded sound effects simulating the illusion of a real log fire.

The entire room had about it the feeling of the past. It was as though Langstock had stepped into another world: a genteel and timeless haven, far from the mean ugly streets of the city where he lived. Glancing a moment at the window at the end of the room he could see the night-time landscape of Mega-City One, its skyline crowded with towering stratoscrapers and neon-lit housing blocks. The world outside seemed distant. Standing in the sanctum of the old man's apartment, he might as well have been transported to another century.

A sanctum, Langstock thought, taking another sip from the glass. That's exactly the word for it. This must be how people lived a hundred years ago. After further consideration, he corrected himself. At least, it was how they lived if they had enough money.

His eyes returned to the view through the window. From this far-off vantage the city seemed almost peaceful. He knew it was an illusion. As a lifelong resident of Mega-City One, Langstock had lived through every one of the city's many disasters. Wars, riots, terrorist atrocities, robot rebellions, attempted coups: at times it felt as though the city simply lurched from one crisis to the next without respite. Even during periods of supposed peace the streets of the Big Meg were far from safe - not with four hundred million people crammed together inside its walls. Crime was rampant, while the pressures of overcrowding and the strains of Twenty-second century life meant outbreaks of mass hysteria and individual psychosis had become commonplace.

Twenty years ago, during his medical training, Langstock had worked an eight-week rotation in the busy Emergency Room of a hospital in Sector 49. It had afforded him much more of a glimpse into the dark side of modern living than he would have ever wanted to see. Working double shifts, he had treated an endless stream of gunshots, knife wounds, malicious poisonings, sexual assaults. The experience had opened his eyes. The city was a powder keg, often requiring little more than the spark of a few crossed words before its people exploded into violence. Husbands killed wives, wives killed husbands, parents killed their children, neighbour killed neighbour and strangers killed strangers. Murders, rapes, serial killings, suicides, block wars: in Mega-City One, horror was never far from the surface. Now, as he looked out the window of the old man's apartment at the city streets below him, Langstock realised those same streets could be seething with open bloodshed, with riot and disorder, and the old man would never know it. The Charles Foster Kane building was two hundred and thirty storeys tall, the penthouse apartment at its apex situated more than a full kilometre above ground level. Warm and safe in an ivory tower, the old man lived a life far from the restless noisy streets and pedways of the mega-city. Here, in his apartment, there was no fear of crime or violence. Here, there was only smug tranquillity, contented days of moneyed ease, and the fake crackle and hiss of a holographic fire.

Abruptly, as Langstock's eyes moved from the window once more to consider his surroundings, a new understanding dawned on him. Like most people, he had long believed the chief value of wealth was that it afforded a man the opportunity to buy more and better examples of the same things other men might buy. A rich man wore a more expensive watch, drove a faster car, lived in a more luxurious home. Now though, he realised the true advantage of great wealth was to be able to buy the things that other men could not. In this case, it had allowed the old man to set himself apart from the rest of the world, creating a quiet sanctuary away from the city's never-ending woes. Wealth, it seemed, was a universal panacea, inoculating its owner against the pains and harms that so often blighted the lives of others. With enough money, a man was given the power to avoid tragedy and elude suffering. Given time, his thoughts might even turn to the possibility of cheating death.

After all, what was the summons that had brought Langstock to this meeting at the old man's apartment, if not proof of that?

He heard footsteps behind him, and the unnatural rasp of an electronic larynx trying to approximate the sound of a human throat clearing itself of phlegm. Turning, Langstock saw the old man's robotic butler standing in the room's open doorway. The machine was perhaps one-and-a-quarter metres in height, its slim humanoid body dressed in full footman's costume: a curled and powdered wig, ruffled shirt, brocaded waistcoat, velvet jacket, knee-length breeches with ankle hose and a pair of buckled patent leather shoes. Incongruously, its appearance brought to mind a metallic child playing guilelessly at make-believe. The robot bowed obsequiously towards him at the waist and gestured behind it to the hallway beyond.

"Thank you for your patience, Doctor Langstock," it said. "If you would be so kind as to step this way? The master will see you now."

First, before he could be taken to meet with the old man, there was a decontamination process to be gone through. Following the robot, Langstock was led to a small anteroom and asked to disrobe. Then, as it took his clothes and hung them neatly on the wire hangers of a nearby closet, the robot directed him towards a white plasti-steel door opposite the one by which they had entered.

"An ultrasonic decontamination chamber," it explained as the door slid open to reveal a bare metal cell about the size of a shower cubicle. "All visitors are required to be thoroughly disinfected before meeting Mr Lowe. The ultrasonic process lasts one minute and thirty seconds precisely. Once it is over you will find fresh clothing waiting for you in the clean room on the other side." For a fraction of a second the robot fell silent, the gleam of its electronic eyes briefly dimming while it consulted silently with some remote third party for further instructions. "Your records do not indicate a history of claustrophobia, doctor. However, if you wish, I can arrange for a course of anti-anxiety medication to be delivered here for your use."

"That won't be necessary," Langstock said.

Naked, he stepped into the chamber. Once the door had slid noiselessly shut behind him, Langstock felt his skin start to tingle as the ultrasonic projectors hidden within the walls began to do their work. After a minute or so there was a muffled roar of engines and a sudden onrush of air as a powerful extractor fan activated beneath the wire mesh floor, sucking away the fallen dirt, bacteria and dead skin cells that had been dislodged from his body by ultrasonic vibration. Several more seconds and the fan stopped,

another warm rush of air greeting him as the door on the other side of the chamber opened with a pressurised hiss. Moving into the room beyond, Langstock found a set of sterile white scrubs and a transparent plasti-cloth surgical mask laid out on a bench ready for him. He put them on, before pressing the release button on the door facing him to gain entrance to the next room along.

"Dr Langstock?" There was a man waiting in the corridor on the other side of the door. He was in his forties, with tanned features and an athletic build. Like Langstock he was dressed in white scrubs, a broad and welcoming smile visible beneath the breath-fogged inner surface of his surgical mask. "My name is Prendergast. I work for Mr Lowe. I hope you will forgive all this..." He gestured toward their collective garments. "A tiresome business, but entirely necessary, I'm afraid. Sadly, Mr Lowe's immune system has been compromised by his illness. As a doctor I'm sure you understand."

"Of course," Langstock said. "I take it you are one of Mr Lowe's doctors?"

"Me? Not at all." Beneath his mask, Prendergast's smile seemed to widen. "I could never aspire to so exalted a status. My duties on Mr Lowe's behalf are more... organisational in nature. I suppose you could call me a glorified gopher. Mr Lowe lets me know his wishes and I see to it they are enacted. In the present instance, he told me to arrange a consultation with the top man in your field. The top man, doctor." The smile grew more unctuous. "Now, please, if you'll just follow me. I assure you, Mr Lowe is eager to meet you."

With Prendergast leading the way, they emerged from the end of the corridor into the tall open space of an airy atrium room. Looking about him, Langstock saw the sloped ceiling and three of the room's four walls were made of enormous panes of reinforced Plexiglas, affording a breathtaking panoramic view of the city around them. The fourth wall separated the atrium from some kind of medical control centre: through a two-way view portal set in the middle of the wall, Langstock could see white-coated doctors and nurses seated at computer work-stations.

"Mr Lowe maintains a permanent medical staff here at the apartment," Prendergast said, gauging the direction of Langstock's gaze. "Normally, of course, they have free access to the atrium. However, given the delicacy of the subject Mr Lowe wishes to discuss with you, he thought it better to have

privacy for your visit. You need not worry about whether you can speak freely here, doctor. This room is soundproofed, and the audio pickups to the control room have been switched off."

"Is that wise?" Langstock asked. "Banishing your doctors to another room like that, I mean? I understand Mr Lowe's health is fragile. If he should suffer a medical emergency-"

"Then, some of the finest medical minds in Mega-City One are only a few metres away." Prendergast nodded towards the doctors on the other side of the view portal, before turning to face him again. "Not to mention the fact we already have a doctor in here with us." Seeing Langstock about to protest, the other man raised his hands in mock surrender. "Please, doctor, before you say it: I know full well that emergency medicine is not your field. If it were, there would be no need for this meeting. Frankly, in this city, emergency medicine specialists are two a credit. Let me put your mind at rest, however. The medical staff are fully capable of monitoring Mr Lowe's condition from inside the control room." Extending a languid hand, Prendergast directed Langstock's attention towards the middle of the atrium. "But please, if you have any concerns about the state of Mr Lowe's health, you should feel free to ask him yourself."

If questioned he would have been hard-pressed to explain it, but as Langstock finally advanced to his first glimpse of Roderick Lowe the overriding image that came to his mind was of some ancient and malignant spider. The old man lay in a bed at the centre of the room, his thin hairless body connected via an array of wires and tubes to a ring of medical machines designed to prolong his life. Moving closer, Langstock saw the machines represented the current cutting edge of medical technology - including items he had attempted to have supplied to his own department at the hospital, only for his applications to be rejected on the grounds of cost. It was obvious the old man was seriously ill: his features were raddled and shrunken with age, his skin yellowed by jaundice, his muscles wasting away from lack of use. Even with an oxygen tube running under his nose to aid his breathing, his respiration was shallow and laboured. As he looked down at his potential patient, Langstock found it difficult to account for his initial impressions. A spider? Perhaps it was the web of wires and tubes surrounding him that had suggested the image, or a flight of fancy brought on by the effect of brandy on an overactive imagination. Shaking his head clear, Langstock looked more intently and saw Roderick Lowe as he really

was: an ailing old man, desperately striving with every considerable resource at his command to fight off death.

"Mr Lowe?" Approaching the old man's bedside, Prendergast adopted the hushed tones of a penitent. "I have brought Dr Langstock." He turned to face Langstock again. "Step forward, doctor. Mr Lowe finds it difficult to move his head - you will have to stand in his line of vision."

The old man's right hand moved, fingers jerking as though experiencing a tremor. Noticing it, Prendergast leant closer.

"What is it, Mr Lowe?" As Prendergast watched carefully, the hand jerked again, thumb and forefinger making a circle, before closing into a fist. It seemed to be some kind of signal. "The windows? Of course, Mr Lowe." Straightening himself, Prendergast tilted his head back slightly and called out in a loud clear voice. "Opaque."

The windows of the atrium began to darken, the view of the city outside gradually replaced by an expanse of obsidian blackness as the reactive substance of the Plexiglas responded to Prendergast's command. Cut off from the neon glare of the city by night, the shadows inside the room deepened and grew longer.

"All the household systems operate by vocal command," Prendergast said to Langstock, serenely anticipating unasked questions. "It is better this way, doctor. So often the curse of great wealth comes in the form of unwanted attention. In the past we've had to contend with news organisations putting spy-cameras on adjacent rooftops, or commercial rivals hiring lip readers. You have no idea the lengths some people will go to in order to monitor Mr Lowe's private dealings. Now, before we begin our business in earnest, I'm sure you would like to familiarise yourself with Mr Lowe's medical charts." Moving to the foot of the bed, he lifted a slim clipboard-sized comp-unit from a data-cradle attached to the bedstead and handed it to Langstock. "Please, read them at your leisure."

Taking the comp-unit, Langstock activated the digital display and quickly skimmed through the records of the medical tests and scan readings performed by Lowe's doctors. The diagnosis confirmed what he suspected already. Multiple organ failure. Heart, lungs, liver, kidneys: the constituent parts of the old man's body were slowly winding down and wearing out. To the layman it might seem that modern medical science was capable of working miracles, but there were limits to what could achieved in trying to sustain an ageing body. According to the records, Roderick Lowe was over

one hundred and sixty years of age - even by current standards he had lived far past the expected span of human life. The ravages of old age took their toll: despite the best care his money could buy, Roderick Lowe had reached the point of diminishing returns in his body's battle with death. The old man was dying. The constant attentions of his doctors, and the unstinting efforts of the machines around him, could make no difference to the eventual outcome.

Casting a practiced eye over the data in the comp-unit, Langstock realised the patient had perhaps a few weeks left to him at most. He checked back over the records, paying especial interest to the results of the neurological tests. Despite the progressive decline in the rest of his body, the old man's brain function and cognitive ability registered as normal. Roderick Lowe's mind was in good shape; his brain unaffected by the slow lingering failure of his other organs.

"I see you have had a number of organ transplants?" Langstock said, addressing the comment to the old man directly.

"Twelve, at last count," Prendergast replied, smoothly interposing himself in the conversation as Lowe stared at Langstock in silence. "Over the years, Mr Lowe has had a number of his organs replaced with new ones created from his own genetic material. Sadly, in his present condition the doctors say any such further organ transplants are unlikely to achieve a lasting benefit. Mr Lowe's entire body is dying. Even if he were able to survive the stress of multiple simultaneous transplants, it would only be a matter of postponing the inevitable."

"You have considered the artificial alternatives?" Langstock asked. "In the last few years, there have been some interesting advances in the field of total cybernetic replacement."

"You mean would he be willing to have his brain transplanted into a robotic body?" Prendergast's face made a sour expression beneath his mask. "Mr Lowe has made it clear he will not consider it. 'A fate worse than death' - those were his exact words, doctor. Before you ask, he has also weighed and likewise rejected the possibility of cryogenic storage. No, at this stage, Mr Lowe has only one viable option left to him. Which brings us neatly to the reason for this meeting."

"You realise the procedure you're asking me to perform is not without its risks?" Turning from Prendergast, Langstock looked down at the old man once more. The eyes that stared back at him were clear and sharp. He hadn't

specifically noted it in the medical records, but Langstock suspected they were transplants. "Even if we assume a best-case scenario, there's the danger of rejection and other complications. The chances of success are perhaps sixty per cent at most. Never mind the problem of finding a donor."

"You may leave that problem to us, doctor," Prendergast said from beside him. "As for the other issues - Mr Lowe is well aware of the risks. The more pertinent question at this stage is whether you are willing to perform the procedure? That, and the matter of your fee."

"Two million credits." The old man spoke at last, the words wheezing out of him in a dry and withered whisper.

"Two million credits." Prendergast echoed his master. "It has always been Mr Lowe's habit to speak plainly when it comes to business. Naturally, that does not include the separate fees we will pay to the hospital and your surgical team. Two million credits, doctor: paid directly into your bank account in two instalments. The first to be paid immediately once we have reached agreement, and the second when you have performed the procedure. Two million credits. You have heard our offer, doctor. Do you wish to accept it?"

Long seconds passed. The room was quiet except for the laboured sounds of the old man's breathing and the rhythmic electronic noises of the medical machines around them. To Langstock, it seemed Prendergast's words still hung in the air. Two million credits. Looking from one to the other of the expectant faces of Lowe and his aide, it was all he could do not to hurriedly agree to their offer at once. As it was, he resisted the temptation. Tonight, the old man's plight and Langstock's own talents had combined to provide him with the opportunity of a lifetime. Now, whatever else might happen, he refused to sell himself too cheaply.

"It's a generous offer." Langstock was acutely aware of the nervous timbre of his own voice. "That is to say, I..."

For a moment he almost faltered, but he thought of the sitting room with its antique furnishings and paintings. He thought of the old man's wealth, so openly and conspicuously on display throughout the apartment. Most of all, he thought of the brandy: a king's ransom in ancient spirits, left out to be consumed freely by the old man's guests despite its value. The thought gave him strength, banishing his misgivings. He began again, more firmly this time.

"You understand there is more to this than simply my personal fee?" he said. "If Mr Lowe is to receive the best possible care, I will need to recruit additional specialists to my staff. Then, there are other questions. A doctor's reputation rests on the quality of his research. Unfortunately, recently my own research efforts have been hampered by a lack of funds..."

His body was dying. It was betraying him with every heartbeat: the clock of his remaining moments counting down with an unstoppable and remorseless precision. How long now? A few days, perhaps? A week? A month?

He was bed-ridden. His arms were weak. He could no longer feel his legs. Inside his body, all the familiar processes of life were slowly ending. He relied on machines to filter his blood and purge his waste. He relied on them for sustenance, for every pulse of his heart, for every hoarse and ragged breath. All the things he had once taken for granted were denied to him. His mobility, his freedom, his appetite: already, he had lost so much. His future was uncertain; each new morning felt like the unclimbed peak of some strange and distant mountain. At times, it seemed to the old man that his memories were all he had left to him.

His memories. They came to him unbidden. His recollections of long-gone days had become more vivid; his past growing brighter as the lights of his future dimmed and faded.

His memories.

Lying in his bed as the conversation continued around him, the old man remembered the world as it had once been. He remembered how it was before the Atom War, before the coming of the Judges, before the mega-cities had even been built.

He remembered the streets of a city called New York. In his memory it was early on a balmy summer's evening, the sun slowly falling towards the horizon. The Twentieth century had not yet died. He was a young man, the whole of his life still ahead of him. Drawn by a sudden impulse, he had decided to take a walk in Central Park. He remembered the pleasure he had taken in the green spaces, his senses glorying in every sensation. The warmth of the sun on his face. The sweet intoxicating smell of fresh-cut grass. The laughter of children as they played nearby.

Children. He loved children. Attracted by the sound, he turned to watch them. He saw their faces, smiling and innocent, clean and fresh, untouched

by the cares of adulthood. A nameless emotion welled up inside him. It was a perfect moment...

Abruptly, his reverie was disturbed. The memory faded, the pleasing recollection of his youth overridden by the more pressing concerns of the present. Around his bed, Prendergast and the doctor talked in earnest voices. Negotiations continued between them. Figures were suggested, discussed, and amended. Two million credits for the doctor. Another million to recruit three new members to his surgical team on extended contracts. Plus, a five million credit "donation" to be paid to the hospital to fund one of the doctor's pet research projects. In total, eight million credits then. The doctor was a greedy man, but ultimately small-minded. Like many gifted men, he had almost no idea of the true worth of his talents. Presented with the opportunity to name his price he had let his own innate timidity rob him of the chance to press home his advantage. Eight million credits? It was barely pocket change. The old man had billions. While, given the nature of the prize at stake, he would have been willing to pay almost any price the doctor might have asked.

The prize. The mere thought of what his money and this meeting with the doctor might buy him nurtured a gently guttering flame of hope within the old man's heart. A new life. That was the prize which lay ahead of him. The old man would be reborn and re-made, his health restored. The infirmities which plagued him would be reversed and done away with entirely. He would no longer need to rely on machines to sustain him. He would walk again. He would breathe unaided. He would be able to go back into the world once more, no longer a prisoner in his bed. Above all else, he would be able to indulge in all the pleasures recently denied him by ill-health and invalidity.

His pleasures. His secret, special pleasures. The old man thought of them now. In his mind the memory of past gratifications burned brightly. With it came a terrible yearning. Of all the hardships he had endured through the last few months of illness, the inability to satisfy his most deeply held desires had been the one he had felt most keenly. It went beyond any purely physical need. It was a hunger imprinted directly into his soul. Without his pleasures, his life had no meaning. They defined his existence. He thought of them constantly: his mind churning with questions of how, where, and when he would next fulfil his desires. Throughout his long life his wealth had often made those questions easier to answer, but the predatory instincts

he had developed in his youth had never left him. His instincts, like his desires, were always with him. They lurked, waiting and watchful, just below the surface of his mind. Forever alert. Never at rest. Ready to take advantage of any opportunity which might arise.

A hospital. Suddenly it occurred to him he would be going to a hospital soon. Naturally, they would put him in a surgical ward. But he wondered whether they had a ward for children...

"Mr Lowe?" A voice intruded into his thoughts. He saw Prendergast gazing down at him. Looking past him, the old man saw they were alone once more. Apparently, the doctor had left the room without saying goodbye. "It has all been settled, Mr Lowe. Dr Langstock has agreed to perform the procedure. The medical side of things is in place. As for the other matter..."

Pausing to look over his shoulder Prendergast made sure there was no one within earshot, then turned back to him once more.

"I have consulted with Gruschenko. He assures me the donor will be available in two days' time." For an instant, an emotion not unlike nervousness passed over Prendergast's face. "Do you find that acceptable?"

Two days. For a moment, the old man savoured the implications. Two days to his rebirth. Two days to the end of his illness. Two days to being able to indulge in his pleasures freely.

Two days to the beginnings of immortality.

Did he find that acceptable, Prendergast had asked.

Silent in his bed, his mind aflame with notions of the bright possibilities of the new life ahead of him, the old man smiled.

ONE

REQUEST FOR ASSISTANCE

A few hours later...

She had received the call from Sector Control at 21.57. A kidnapping at Chuck Lindberg Block. The victim, a three month-old baby boy, was still missing. The street Judge investigating the crime had requested Psi-Judge backup. "Can you respond?" the dispatcher had asked her. She was coming to the end of a double shift. In the last sixteen hours she had dealt with ten murders, three attempted murders, a poltergeist haunting, two arsons, a terrorist bombing, and a psych-case tweaked out on Crystal Jesus who had tried to split her skull open with a crowbar. "Can you respond?" There had been only one answer.

"Affirmative to that, Control. Psi-Judge Anderson responding. ETA to Chuck Lindberg: seven minutes. Tell them I'm on my way."

She had made it in six; the powerful engine of her Lawmaster eating up the distance to her destination like it had something to prove. As she arrived at Lindberg and pulled her bike into the block forecourt, a tall stern-featured street Judge named Bryson was waiting. As they rode up in the elevator together, he filled her in on the details.

"The victim is a male infant named Garret Cooley," Bryson said. "He was snatched four hours ago from a municipal child care crèche while the parents were shopping in the block mall. Surveillance footage from the crime scene identifies the perp as one Lucas Allan Verne - a Lindberg resident, just like the parents."

Opening one of the pouches on his utility belt, Bryson handed her a 2-D surveillance image printed on a folded square of glossy paper. She saw a grainy close-up of a thin, bearded man in his forties, carrying the baby wrapped in a blanket.

"He's a psych-case, sentenced to the psycho-cubes three times in the last four years and diagnosed as suffering from acute paranoid schizophrenia with religious delusions."

"A paranoid schizophrenic?" Anderson said. "And they released him back into the community? Sounds like someone dropped the ball over at the Psycho Unit."

"I wouldn't disagree." Bryson shrugged. "Though, in their defence, there's nothing in the perp's history to suggest a tendency towards violence. Verne's previous arrests were for Public Order and Noise Annoyance offences: he likes to preach in public without a licence. Last time they released him, the doctors put him on mood stabilisers and anti-psychotics to control his behaviour." He shrugged again. "Looks like he stopped taking his meds."

"All right, so we've got a missing child who's been kidnapped by a psych-case," Anderson grimaced. "I'm taking it that's the bad news. Assuming the baby is still alive, do we have any idea where Verne might have taken him?"

"That's why I called in a Psi-Judge," Bryson told her. The elevator stopped, the doors opening on the thirty-second floor. "The perp lives in Apartment 27-C, on the same floor as the Cooley family. I was hoping a psychometric scan of his apartment might be able to turn up some leads..."

If the interior of the perp's apartment was any kind of guide to his mental state, Anderson did not want to dwell too long on the Cooley baby's chances. As Bryson opened the door and ushered her inside, she was greeted at once by a scene of chaos. The apartment was a mess. The floor was strewn with discarded take-out cartons and rotting leftovers. The furniture was stained, mildewed and in an advanced state of disrepair. The walls were plastered in religious images and pieces of text held in place with a variety of pins, adhesive tape and sticky-tak.

"Well, I don't see this place getting a write-up in any of the Better Homes 'zines," Anderson said as she stepped forward to inspect the apartment more closely. "Looks like the perp isn't much into housekeeping. Now, let's see what he is into."

Turning to scrutinise the written materials stuck to the walls, she found a mixture of pages from the Bible and news-zine articles downloaded onto cheap paper from the Megaweb. The Biblical passages were mostly from the Book of Revelations, with references to the signs and portents of the Last Judgement highlighted in red marker pen. The news items concentrated on the Apocalypse War: she saw articles discussing the lingering radioactive legacy left by the nuclear exchanges during the war, the increased incidence of mutation among the Big Meg's population in its aftermath, images of devastated streets and of fallout victims covered in

burns and tumours. Taken together, the apocalypse in both its secular and religious incarnations seemed to loom large in the inner world of Lucas Verne. Even as she rifled through more of the flotsam materials around her though, Anderson realised such insights brought her no closer to discovering where the perp might have headed after he abducted the baby.

"You getting anything?" Bryson asked her. She noticed he was still standing in the apartment doorway, as though he was wary of getting too close while she did her voodoo.

"You'll have to give me a minute," she told him. "Before I start the scan, it would help if we could find something that's special to the perp. If I scan the apartment cold, I'm just as likely to pick up random thoughts about what he had for dinner last night. I need something that belongs to him. Something personal. It'll help me get a better lock on him."

"Uh-huh." Pulling back the edge of the gauntlet on his left hand Bryson checked his watch, then tapped its face. "Not trying to tell you your business, Anderson. But the clock's ticking on this one."

"I know it is, Bryson," Anderson pursed her lips, trying to keep her temper. "But you're the one who called for a Psi-Judge. If you want me to find you any leads, you're going to have to let me do things my way."

Sighing inwardly, Anderson returned her attention to the apartment's interior. Bryson's attitude was wearingly familiar to her. In common with most street Judges, he seemed to have no concept of the difficulties involved in a psychometric scan. She could understand the reasons. By the nature of their job, street Judges tended to be well grounded in everyday reality: they were accustomed to a world of hard and fast rules, where the answer to every question was unequivocally yes or no. Psi-Judges inhabited a different world. The psychic realm was vague and mysterious, almost by definition: its answers often far from clear-cut. From experience, she knew it was no good trying to tell a street Judge that. They did not seem to have the equipment to cope with a world without easy answers.

In course of her twenty-odd years as a Psi-Judge, Anderson had performed literally thousands of psychometric scans. She was all too aware of the problems of the technique, and how hard it could be to achieve a worthwhile result. She had not been joking when she told Bryson she might end up with nothing more useful than the perp's memories of what he had had for dinner. Scanning a person's home would frequently reveal little to aid an investigation: a welter of trivial and inconsequential thoughts

crowding out anything that might be of value. Her chances of conducting a successful scan would be much improved if she could find one of the perp's belongings - something he cared about - to help her link more directly with the things that were important to him. The kind of things which might have persuaded him to kidnap a child in the first place.

Then, she saw it. Set carefully apart from the clutter disfiguring the apartment, she noticed an old leather-bound Bible lying open on a table beside the sofa. It stood out at once: in an age where every book was available as a data-slug or in downloadable format on the Megaweb, no one owned the real thing anymore. Much less leather-bound, with cloth ribbons inside it to mark out favoured pages. It had the look of an ancient and valuable family heirloom, passed down through the generations. Skimming through the book, she saw a series of names written on the first page: some of them faded and worn with age. They all had the surname 'Verne', with Lucas Verne's name written in blocky letters below the others at the bottom of the page. Running a hand over it, Anderson knew instinctively she had found exactly what she was looking for. If there was a way into the world of Lucas Verne, this would be it.

It must have been in Verne's family for generations, she thought. It's probably his most treasured possession. And, given his religious views, it's obvious he reads it all the time. I doubt there's anything more important to him in the world than what's in this book.

Closing the book's cover, Anderson removed one of her gloves before placing her hand on the Bible once more. She felt the coolness of the leather beneath her palm and the richness of its grain. Drawing a deep breath, she began to steel herself for what lay ahead.

There were dangers, always, in attempting to pick up the psychic impressions from a disturbed mind. Madness could be contagious: the human mind was fragile, and even a highly trained Psi-Judge like Anderson had reason to fear becoming too closely embroiled with the damaged psyche of a madman. Granted, the impressions experienced through a psychometric scan were rarely that powerful, but sometimes insanity could make a mind burn more brightly. It was entirely possible Lucas Verne had left more of himself imprinted in the pages of the book than a well-adjusted person might do. By scanning it, Anderson would be running the risk of direct exposure to his delusions. With the life of a child at stake though, she did not see how she had any other choice.

All right, Cass, here goes nothing, she told herself. Let's see if you can get through this one without getting a free trip to the funny farm thrown in as a bonus.

Taking another deep breath, she closed her eyes. She stilled her mind, narrowing her perceptions with a practiced ease, letting the sounds and sensations of the physical world around her fade away. In its place, she concentrated on her breathing first. She counted deep breaths, in and out, focussing on the steady rhythmic contractions of her lungs. Withdrawing even more from the physical world, she went to a small quiet place inside her own mind. There was nothing in there of the world and its concerns. There was nothing within it of her fears and anxieties. There was only a sense of calm. A sense of peace. She felt the trance state come over her and, at last, she was ready to begin.

She was ready. Extending her perceptions once more, she expanded her mind past the discrete shapes of physical reality to the shifting and more vital shades of the unseen psychic world around her. As a child taking her first lessons in Psi-School, they had taught her to call it the "psi-flux". It was a place of infinite possibilities: a mysterious and endlessly fluctuating realm of pure energy that co-existed with the physical world yet, at the same time, was separate and outside it.

It was the source of every psychic's powers. Its subtle energies allowed telekinetics to move objects with their minds; it allowed precogs to see the future; it let pyrokines start fires through no other cause than the force of their wills. Anderson was a telepath, her powers trained and honed by her years as a Psi-Judge. Her connection to the psi-flux allowed her to read minds, send and receive thoughts, sense psychic vibrations, and utilise other powers besides. Now, she reached out to it, seeking the imprint of Lucas Verne among the shifts and modulations of the currents around her. She gave herself up to the psi-flux. It was like drifting in a dark and ever-changing sea. She reached out. Feeling the elusive traces of Lucas Verne, she tried to home in on them. She let the psi-flux's currents pull her closer. Following the tide, she let it lead her to her destination. The psi-flux moved, and she went with it.

Ready or not, Lucas: here I come.

She let it lead her, slowly, effortlessly, inexorably, into the mind of a madman.

She was in his head, as he worried and fretted at the world outside. She was in his head as he paced his apartment, stalking its bounds like some caged and raging beast. She was in his head as he watched the Tri-D news stations each night, the sound turned down low as images of chaos and disorder played out in the air before him. Sometimes, the news was so bad he sat crying in his chair for hours, his tears staining the pages of the Bible open in his lap.

She was Lucas Verne. She was inside his head.

It had started when he lost his job. In the wake of unemployment he had begun to spend most of his time in his apartment, watching the news on the Tri-D. There were a dozen twenty-four-hour news stations in Mega-City One. He had watched them all, obsessively flicking the channel from one crisis to the next whenever they cut to commercials.

The state of the world had troubled him. It did not take a genius to see that things were steadily getting worse. The Great Atom War had transformed ninety per cent of the Earth into a radioactive wasteland. The seas had been poisoned. The cities were overcrowded. Crime was on the increase. Mutation had become commonplace. Every day on the Tri-D there were reports of fresh horrors: wars and riots, plagues and famines, ecological catastrophes and strange new monsters. Alone in his apartment, Lucas Verne had experienced a growing feeling of foreboding. The world seemed terrifying. Nothing made sense anymore. It was like everything was going to hell and nobody cared. He had begun to fear the future. It was as though the entire world was in a downward spiral, caught helpless in the grip of a frightening and unstoppable process of decline.

Slowly, understanding had dawned on him. He had resisted it at first, but eventually he had come to the realisation there was a reason why things were so awful. There was a reason why he had lost his job. A reason why the world had started to go wrong. A reason why everything in his life had turned to shit.

It was all in the Bible, in the pages of the Book of Revelations. For years Lucas had turned to the Good Book for comfort. He had leafed through its wisdoms, following the example set by generations of his forefathers before him. When times were hard, he had turned to the word of the Lord Grud for answers. Now, by virtue of his belief in Grud, he saw past the outward symptoms of the world's ills to the darker cause hidden beneath them. Finally, the truth was revealed.

The world was coming to an end.

It was all in his Bible. He saw that the Great Atom War and the Apocalypse War had only been the beginning. The True Apocalypse was at hand. He lived in an age of signs and wonders. The Four Horseman of War, Pestilence, Famine and Death were at work in the world. The Mark of the Beast was the sign of mutation. The Whore of Babylon was the sexual promiscuity he saw in his neighbours and in the programmes on the Tri-D entertainment channels. He realised he was living through the Time of Tribulation: the period when the faith of the righteous would be put to the test. Soon, the nations of the Earth would turn against each other. The Great Beast would walk among them. The countdown to Armageddon had already begun. These were the Final Days.

The truth had frightened and appalled him in equal measure. All his life Lucas had tried to live by Grud's Commandments, but now he felt a deepening unease about the state of his own soul. He wondered whether he was truly one of the righteous. He worried about the Last Judgement. When it came to separating the wheat from the chaff, would Grud assign him a place in heaven or cast him with the other sinners into the fiery pits of hell?

Even as such thoughts plagued him though, he realised it was not within his power to do anything about it. Most likely, the shape of his destiny had already been decided. It was too late to buy his salvation with last-minute prayers and frenzied devotions. For all he knew, he was as doomed to damnation as every other sinner in Mega-City One. Brooding, Lucas realised he was utterly powerless to avert his fate. Armageddon was coming, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

Or, at least, that was how it seemed until he saw the child.

It had happened in the hallway outside his apartment. Lucas had just returned home after a long day spent preaching of the wrath of Grud to the heedless masses in Speakers Square - the one place in the city where he could hold forth on his views without the Judges throwing him in the cubes. Lost in his own thoughts, he had passed the Cooley woman from apartment 37-A as she stood outside the elevators talking to one of the neighbours. She was showing off her new baby. A boy. She said his name was Garret. Largely indifferent to the lives of his fellow block residents, at first Lucas had ignored them. Until, from the corner of his eye, he had spotted a glint of light come from the direction of the baby. Then, gazing closer, Lucas had seen something remarkable. Something extraordinary...

A halo.

The baby's head had been surrounded by a radiating nimbus of divine light. His blue eyes had sparkled. His face had been angelic. Staring dumbstruck, Lucas had blinked his eyes in disbelief. When he had opened them again, the halo had been gone. The moment had passed. Noticing the mother was looking at him strangely, Lucas had hurried to his door and retreated inside his apartment.

It had been clear, whatever the nature of the vision he had experienced, Lucas had been the only one to see it. The memory of it had stayed with him. It was imprinted on his retinas when he closed his eyes. It lingered in his dreams when he fell asleep.

A halo.

The fact of it had astounded him. In his apartment, Lucas had considered the meaning of the vision for days. On the surface the Cooleys were a perfectly ordinary family, little different from the millions of other similar families throughout the city. Yet, Lucas was sure of what he had seen. The baby's features had shone with such a perfect and saintly light.

No, not saintly. The brilliance of the halo had been of an entirely different and higher order. It had been like staring at the sun. It had been unearthly, with the glow of a divinity reborn into human flesh.

A halo.

Slowly, the true significance of the vision had dawned on him. It was hard to believe, but he realised there was only one explanation. Lucas had checked his facts. He had checked the names of the Cooley baby's parents in the block's register of tenants. It had been there in black and white. Their names were listed as Joseph and Mary.

Joseph and Mary. It could not be a coincidence. Whether through some twist of fate or quirk of the divine order, Lucas realised he had been granted an opportunity beyond all his wildest dreams. The realisation filled him with a new sense of purpose. Suddenly, a new mission in life was clear to him. A small voice inside tried to dissuade him, but he refused to let it tame him. He would not waste this chance. For the first time in as long as he could remember, Lucas had known exactly what to do next.

Banishing his last misgivings, he had decided to kill the Messiah.

"You're telling me the perp saw a halo around the Cooley kid's head?" Bryson said. They were standing in the apartment, and Anderson had just

relayed the results of her psychometric scan. "But that's just crazy..."

"Of course it is. He's a psych-case, remember?" Anderson replied. "If you want an explanation, then maybe it was a trick of the light or simply a hallucination brought on by the perp's delusions. Either way, it doesn't matter. All that matters now is that Lucas Verne believes the Cooley baby is the new Messiah. That's why he kidnapped him. He thinks by killing the baby he can prevent the Second Coming and stop the Apocalypse from happening."

"Grud..." Bryson shook his head in disbelief. "You were right when you said the Psycho Unit dropped the ball on this one. Even by the standards of MC-1, this drokker sounds as crazy as it gets."

"I wouldn't disagree," Anderson smiled grimly as she echoed the street Judge's earlier words. Taking her hand from the Bible before her, she began to pull her glove on once more. "The psychic traces he left in his Bible were pretty strong. At times it was like I was right there in his head with him. Believe me, it's not an experience I'd like to repeat anytime soon."

"What about new leads? Did you pick up anything that might tells us where he took the kid?"

"Nothing," Anderson sighed. "It was all about his delusions. Armageddon. The Last Judgement. The Second Coming. Wait a minute..."

She fell silent for a moment, trying to concentrate on the vague memory of a fleeting image she had seen during the scan.

"There was one thing," she said. "It seemed out of place among all the religious malarkey, but I caught a brief glimpse of something weird. It was some kind of cartoon character. It looked like a man wearing top hats and tails, with a burger where his head should have been..."

"Mayor McMunce's McMarvellous Burgers!" Bryson suddenly cut her off excitedly. "It's an old munce-burger factory, right in this sector. The place is derelict. It got closed down years ago. There's a big plasteen statue of the character you described on the factory roof! Grud... And you know what else?"

Bryson's voice went hoarse as he made the connection.

"Lucas Verne used to work there."

TWO

ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

Maybe it was a sign he was as slow on the uptake, but Leonard had been in the sewers beneath Mega-City One for a full ten minutes before he noticed the smell. It was the lack of it that surprised him. He was wading knee-deep through raw sewerage, and it seemed to him the stink should have been strong enough to burn the eyes from his sockets and choke his throat. Instead, the smell was kind of damp and mouldy, but nowhere near as bad as he would have expected. It was another one of the city's many mysteries, he figured: like robots, and doors that talked, or any of the other wondrous magical things he had seen since he had come there from the Cursed Earth. Somehow, the people of the city had discovered a secret way to stop their shit from stinking.

"It's the germs that do it," his friend Daniel said. The little boy was sitting perched high up on Leonard's shoulders. Since they were alone, with no one around to hear them, Daniel said the words aloud instead of whispering them into Leonard's mind directly, his high-pitched voice echoing through the tunnels. "They put germs in the water to break down the sewerage and stop the smell. It only works at the top levels, though. If we were going deeper you'd need a gas mask, and a body suit, and all kinds of stuff. I saw it on the Tri-D once." The explanation over, he pointed at something ahead of them. "There's a loose stone in the roof over there, Leonard. Watch you don't bang your head."

Silently, Leonard nodded. He had already seen it. Leonard had no great fear of bumbling into things in the dark. He knew he wasn't exactly smart, and some people said he was as ugly as sin, but he could see as clear as daylight in all but total darkness. It was one of his "special compensations".

There were others. He was big. He was strong. He was fast. One time, in the Cursed Earth, he had killed three Gila-Munjas with his bare hands after they had caught him out in the open. He didn't seem to feel pain, or the cold, or hunger as much as most people. If he wanted he could go whole days without drinking water, even in a desert. He could survive being poisoned - the claws of one of the Gila-Munjas had taught him that. His ears were sharp. He could climb almost anything. He could walk real quiet. He could track and hunt and fish. He could sense heatsign, reading the

patterns of warmth in anything near him. His special compensations - that was what his mother had called them.

"It doesn't matter that you don't look like other people." He remembered his mother's words from long ago, his memory of her so bright and vivid in his mind it was almost as though she was there in the sewers with them. She was beautiful. Her eyes were warm and kind. Her voice was soft and gentle. "You're my little boy and I'll always love you. It doesn't matter if they call you 'mutie', or say you're ugly. Always remember, Leonard: what life takes from you with one hand, it gives with the other. Yes, you were born different. But nature has given you special compensations."

His special compensations. Like so much else his mother had taught him, Leonard treated the words as sacred. His memories of her, and the things she did and said during their all-too-brief time together, had become the lessons on which he had built his life. His mother's wisdoms were his gospel. Thinking of her now, Leonard felt a terrible yearning pain deep within his chest. His eyes started to water. His vision became clouded.

"You're thinking of your momma, aren't you?" Daniel asked him. "I can feel it in your head. It always makes you sad."

"Yeah, it does." Wiping his eyes with the edge of his coat sleeve, Leonard snuffled back his tears. "I miss her, Daniel. I miss her so much." His voice faltered. "You remember the promise we swore, don't you? The one when you said you'd help me find her?"

"I remember. I'll help you. But remember what you swore as well?" The little boy's voice grew hard. "The bad men, Leonard. The ones who hurt me. You said we'd take care of them first. 'Cross my heart', you said."

"I remember," Leonard nodded. "Cross my heart, Daniel. Just like I promised. Cross my heart, I'll make them die."

It had been Daniel's idea to go in through the sewers. He had explained it all and Leonard had agreed with him, just like always. As he walked through the muck of the sewers with the boy on his shoulders, it occurred to Leonard how quickly he had become used to Daniel making all his decisions. He did not mind it, of course. Daniel was his friend. If there was one big advantage to that, aside from the fact he was no longer lonely, it was that Leonard did not need to come up with his own ideas any more. It had never been his strongest point, anyway. It was not so much that he was stupid; more that it sometimes took him an age to think things through.

Now though, he had Daniel to handle all the hard work of thinking, and Leonard was glad of it.

As he continued to trudge through the tunnels, Leonard's mind drifted to their conversation back at the warehouse before the sewer journey had started.

"We have to be careful, Leonard," Daniel had told him. "It's a long walk from here to the bad man's place. It's dark outside, but we have to make sure nobody sees you. If they do, they might call the Judges. You understand, don't you?"

In reply, Leonard had nodded. He knew what he looked like. He had lifted one of his big hands to point to his face: the thick jutting ridges of his forehead, the broad, strangely leaf-shaped nose with an ugly fissure at its centre, his leathery skin. It was the reason Leonard wore his hair long and let it hang down low over his face, to hide his features.

"I understand, Daniel," Leonard had said. "If the Judges catch me, they'll send me back to the Cursed Earth. Then, I'll never find her."

At the time, there was nothing else that had needed to be said. Finding his mother had been the reason he had come to the city in the first place. The idea that he might fail, that the Judges might stop him, was the worst thing he could have imagined.

Abruptly, the flow of his memories was interrupted as Leonard became wary of impending danger. Pausing to scan his surroundings, he had sensed heatsign in the tunnel ahead of them. It was something big. An animal lay submerged and invisible in the murky waters as though waiting in ambush.

Cautiously, Leonard picked up a loose piece of rockcrete and threw it in the water. As the rock landed, he heard the snap of powerful jaws. The waters churned. He caught a glimpse of white scales and a thrashing tail as an enormous reptile briefly surfaced, then dived down again and swam away.

"A sewer-gator," Daniel said. "They live down here, feeding off the rats and sewer fish. Guess he didn't like rockcrete, though." He called out after the retreating croc. "Bet you broke a tooth off, didn't you, Mr Gator?"

For a moment, as though he had said something really funny, Daniel laughed. The sound was childish and carefree. Leonard was happy to hear it: so often the little boy seemed older than his years, his face set in sombre lines, his eyes shadowed and haunted. Too soon though, the laughter stopped as Daniel's mood of seriousness returned.

"We should get going, Leonard. Up ahead, the tunnel forks in two. We want to go left. That's this way." He tapped on Leonard's shoulder. "And, be careful of your footing. The tunnel floor gets slippery soon."

Nodding silently again, Leonard began to trudge down the tunnel, keeping a close eye out in case the gator returned. Leonard followed Daniel's directions. He was careful about his footing. He watched out for low stones hanging from the roof. He listened for Daniel's instructions and followed them to the letter.

Just like always, he did what Daniel told him.

In the end, getting to the bad man was easy. Daniel had worked everything out. They made their way through the sewers until they found an access hatch that led into the underblock maintenance tunnels directly below the building they wanted. Then, they followed the maintenance system into the ventilation ducts. It was a tight squeeze for Leonard, and a couple of times he snagged his coat, but soon they emerged from a duct into the bottom of the building's elevator shaft.

We have to be quiet, Daniel said to him, his voice whispering into Leonard's mind as he climbed up the first part of the shaft. Above them, a humming noise grew louder as the elevator descended towards them. *There are people inside the elevator. We can't let them hear us*.

Waiting until the elevator had stopped nearly right on top of them, Leonard stretched out his arms and grabbed hold of a metal rail at the bottom of the elevator car. Daniel was on Leonard's back, his arms clamped tightly around his neck. Together, they dangled from the base of the car as it began to rise once more, pulling them upwards.

Now, we wait until the elevator stops again and the people inside have got out, Daniel said. *After that, we'll have the car to ourselves. Oh, and Leonard? Whatever you do, don't look down*.

Following his friend's advice, Leonard hung from the car and watched as the walls of the elevator shaft slowly glided past them. He tried to count the floors as they passed, but lost his place after fifty. Abruptly, the elevator stopped. Through the floor of the car above their heads, Leonard heard footsteps and voices, and the sound of the elevator doors opening and sliding shut.

All clear, Daniel gave him the signal.

It was a close fit, even tighter than it had been in the ducts, but by breathing in as much as he could Leonard managed to wriggle his way up through the small space between the side of the car and the wall of the shaft. On the roof of the car there was a hatchway, but as Leonard went to open it he noticed something about the car that made him uneasy.

How does it stay up?, he asked Daniel. He could not see any cables or wires holding the elevator car in place. The entire car hovered unsupported in mid-air inside the shaft, as if by magic.

Anti-gravity, Daniel told him, as though it answered everything.

Still unsatisfied, Leonard wanted to ask another question and find out more. Daniel's voice had sounded impatient though, so instead he forced the hatchway open and squeezed himself down into the car. Inside, to the side of the elevator's interior door, he saw a long triple row of buttons, each marked with a different number. Leonard knew his numbers, even if he wasn't so good when it came to reading words and such. He pressed the button marked "200" and waited for the car to start moving.

Nearly there, he told Daniel as the elevator begin to rise. Inwardly, he still wondered about anti-gravity. It was another of the city's mysteries. Trying to puzzle it out for himself, Leonard realised anti--gravity must be the opposite of gravity. It felt like some kind of breakthrough. Now, if he could only get Daniel to explain to him what gravity was, he figured the whole thing might start to make sense.

There was a small display panel set above the elevator's doors. It counted up the numbers of the building's floors as the elevator rose past them. Once again, Leonard was struck by how smart Daniel was. When his friend had first told him the bad man was on the two-hundredth floor, Leonard had imagined having to climb the entire two hundred storeys the same way he would a mountain. This way made his life a whole lot easier.

Suddenly, with the display counter at one hundred and ninety, the elevator stopped.

"You have requested a floor in the restricted access zone," a polite voice piped up from inside the metal grille next to the elevator buttons. Caught by surprise, Leonard nearly jumped out of skin. "Please insert your building keycard and enter your personal identification number if you wish to continue."

Peering closely at the grille, Leonard breathed a sigh of relief as he realised there was a talking machine hidden somewhere inside it. Of all the

strange sights and sounds of the city, he had found it hardest to get used to the fact there were machines that talked. In the Cursed Earth, machines were just machines. In the city though, they all seemed to have their own voices. Cars warned their drivers to make sure they were wearing their seatbelts. Doors told you to stand clear when they were opening, and to have a nice day as you left them. One time, Leonard had even encountered a garbage bin that had thanked him for his litter. Frankly, he found it kind of creepy. In Mega-City One it was like the machines were so lonely and desperate for conversation they could not bear to let anyone pass through a door or throw away a food wrapper in silence.

We're going have to climb the rest of the way, Daniel said. Leonard could feel the little boy's impatience inside his head; an urgent sensation growing stronger. *It's just another ten floors, Leonard. Another ten floors, and then we'll be there*.

Ten floors. It didn't sound so much, but Leonard soon found out climbing an elevator shaft from the inside was trickier than it looked. Squeezing out again through the hatch in the car roof, Leonard grabbed a good hold of the shaft wall and began to climb it while Daniel held tight round his neck and hung from his back. The wall was smooth and sheer, its surface slippery with an oily lubricant. To make progress, Leonard had to push his fingers into the slim gaps between the metal panels that made up the walls and force them far enough apart to create handholds. It was hard work, and as he felt his feet slip and slide on the slick wall below him in search of purchase Leonard remembered Daniel's words from earlier. Whatever you do, don't look down. It was sound advice. Admittedly, the elevator car would have blocked the view, but if Leonard had looked down and seen how high up they were, he got the feeling he might have puked.

Finally, gratefully, Leonard made it to the top of the shaft and hauled himself onto the thin ledge peeking out from beneath the sliding doors on the two-hundredth floor. Balancing carefully, he prised the doors open.

Emerging from the shaft, Leonard stepped out into a softly carpeted hallway with Daniel beside him. There was no one about. The floor seemed deserted. Looking about him, Leonard saw a row of doors set either side of the hallway, each with a small rectangular metal plaque on the front with writing on it.

That's the one. Daniel hurried to one of the doors, his voice excited as he read the words on the plaque. *Nails and Ah-so-she-ates, Import and Export.*

James Nails, Leonard. That's the bad man. That's what he calls himself.

Advancing to the door, Leonard tried the handle and found it was locked. Checking the hallway again to make sure it was empty, he put his shoulder against the door and tried to use his weight to gently ease the lock open. Instead, the lock broke with an audible metallic shriek. Wincing, Leonard swiftly stepped through the doorway and closed the door behind him. Inside, the room was dark, but he could see light creeping across the floor from underneath a door at the other side of the room. Someone was working late. Hearing movement, Leonard quickly hid behind a desk in the darkest part of the room and gestured at Daniel to stay behind him.

He waited.

"Who's there?" he heard a voice call out as the door on the other side of the room opened. He saw a man appear, a gun visible in his hand as he was silhouetted in the lights of the room behind him.

"Who's there?" the man called out again. He stepped cautiously away from the doorway into the darkness, the gun in his hand raised and ready.

Even as the man moved further towards them, Leonard could see him clearly in the light spilling out through the open doorway at his back. The man was thickset and broadly built, with a slight paunch to his stomach and a slouch to his shoulders. The skin of his face was taut, and it seemed strangely tight around his cheeks and forehead.

Step by step, the man came closer.

"I know you're there," he called out again. He had a young man's face, but an old man's voice. "I can hear you. I can hear you breathing."

He was bluffing. Leonard could hear the slight tremor of uncertainty in the man's tone. It was a dead giveaway.

"The Judges are on the way," the man lied again. "I called them." He moved closer to the place where Leonard was hiding.

Closer. The man was nearly within arm's reach now. Leonard could see his eyes as they nervously scanned from side to side, trying to penetrate the shadows. For an instant, the man's gaze lingered on a lamp on a nearby table as though he was wondering whether to turn it on. It was all the opening Leonard needed. Jumping out from behind the desk, he lashed out, batting the gun from the man's hand. Feeling his fingers break the man tried to cry out, but Leonard's hands were already around his throat. Leonard tightened his grip, lifting the man easily so his feet dangled above the floor. He began to squeeze.

"Kill him!" Daniel was quickly at Leonard's side. The boy's voice was shrill and breathless. He yelled out loud, no longer caring if anyone heard them. "He's a bad man, Leonard! He was one of the men who hurt me! Kill him! Kill him now!"

Leonard did what Daniel told him. He squeezed harder. The man's hands scrabbled desperately at Leonard's arms, his feet flailed uselessly beneath him. His eyes bugged out of their sockets, the taut skin of his face growing ever more taut. Leonard squeezed harder. He felt the bones of the man's neck grinding against the palms of his hands. The man's face was flushed and red. Leonard saw the man's eyes staring at him in fear and panic, his mouth working soundlessly as he gulped vainly for air. Briefly, Leonard felt almost sorry for him. He squeezed harder.

The man's neck broke with a crack. The body went limp, a puddle forming on the floor beneath it as the bladder let go.

It was over. Easing the dead man gently to the floor, Leonard found he felt no great sense of triumph. He had killed plenty of people before: maybe fifteen or twenty of them, if you counted Gila-Munjas as people. Life was hard in the Cursed Earth, and the needs of survival or plain angry vengeance meant sometimes Leonard had been forced to kill without thought of conscience. But he had felt no fear or hatred towards this man. It seemed to make things different somehow. Leonard wasn't quite sure why, but it felt like for the first time in his life he had committed a murder. He had killed a stranger in cold blood, strangling the life out of him just because that was what Daniel had told him to do. Daniel had said this was a bad man. He had said James Nails deserved to die. Looking down into the dead man's blank and lifeless eyes, Leonard hoped he was right.

"It's not enough," Daniel said. He seemed calmer, now the man was dead. His voice was hollow. As he stared at the body of the dead man in front of them, he seemed dissatisfied. It was though he was still angry at the dead man. "People should know he was a bad man and that was why we killed him. There has to be some way we could tell them."

Daniel fell quiet for a time. Standing beside him, waiting for his friend to speak, Leonard was struck by how small the boy was: even if he had stood on the tips of his toes, his head would have barely come up to the side of Leonard's hip. At the same time, it felt like Daniel was bigger than him somehow: as though something dark burned inside his frail childish body and lent him power.

"We should leave a message," Daniel said at last. He turned to look at Leonard, his little boy eyes filled with an almost frightening intensity. "Leonard, you carry a knife, don't you?"

"Sure," Leonard answered. Fumbling in the pocket of his greatcoat, he pulled out his clasp knife. He had had it for years. Back in the Cursed Earth he had used it to cut up his food, trim ropes, skin and gut animals; he had even killed with it once or twice. Most often these days though he used it to cut open boxes at the warehouse where he worked.

"Good," Daniel said. "I want you to write something for me. A message. Don't worry, I know you can't read. I'll tell you what to write and how to make the letters. And I'll tell you where to write it.

"I just need you to do the cutting."

THREE

ACTS OF JUDGEMENT

The baby was crying. Its high-pitched wails spread across the dusty interior of the derelict factory, echoes rebounding from the rusting junk-pile landscape of broken munce-grinders and disused conveyor belts. Sitting on a metal staircase to the side of the old factory floor, Lucas Verne tried to soothe the squealing infant. He rocked it gently in his arms, back and forth. He cooed at it. He made funny faces. His efforts, though, were unsuccessful. Lacking any real experience of babies, he had hardly any idea how to handle one, much less finally persuade it to stop its screaming.

The baby had been crying, on and off, ever since he had grabbed it from the block crèche. The sound was relentless. It seemed to drill into Lucas's head, creating a build-up of pressure at the back of his neck and behind his eyes that made him want to moan in pain. Abandoning his fruitless attempts to console the child, Lucas reminded himself of the reason he had kidnapped it to begin with. The knife lay on the step beside him. The blade was keen and sharp. He only had to pick up the weapon and, with one quick movement, it would all be over.

One quick movement, and he could stop the baby's tears forever.

Yet still, somehow, he found he was unable to do it. Unsure of his courage, Lucas had sat in the same place for hours while the child incessantly screeched and wailed at him. It had all seemed so clear back at Lindberg, but once he was alone with his victim in a secluded place the enormity of the act he contemplated had abruptly dawned on him. Chastened, he had told himself there was no other option. There was too much at stake to allow a failure of nerve to dissuade him. He had waited, staring down at the child, hoping the passage of time and the baby's continual noise might somehow combine to give him the strength he needed. Instead, he had felt his courage wax and wane inside him. At times, it felt like he was almost ready, only for his decisiveness to melt away as he reached for the knife. Competing instincts of mercy and ruthlessness warred within him: he did not hate this child, but the bitter consequences if he left his task undone appalled him.

He was going to kill the Messiah. Even now, the thought made him uneasy. He felt light-headed and sick to the very pit of his stomach. Already,

he had heaved up everything he had eaten, a puddle of vomit left festering beside one of the ruined packaging machines on the factory floor. Now, he felt tremors run through him as dry heaves wracked his body. It was almost too much for his mind to process. He was about to set himself against the Lord Grud's grand design. He was going to defy his Creator. He would commit an act of rebellion even greater than sinful Eve's in the Garden of Eden.

In an attempt to stiffen his waning resolve once more, he thought back over his reasons. When he had first realised the child's true nature, he had told himself he had no choice. The Apocalypse was coming. The world would end. Billions would die, and only Lucas Verne could stand against it. Only he could avert the Final Judgement. He tried to reassure himself that perhaps even this might be some secret part of Grud's master plan. Grud was ineffable: his ways unknowable to the mind of Man. It could be that it was his destiny, divinely ordained, to kill the Christ-child. Why else would Grud have allowed the child to be born into the same housing block where Lucas lived? But even that thought only raised more questions.

Why? Why would Grud do this to him? Lucas was reminded of the story of Abraham: of how the Lord Grud had ordered him to sacrifice his son Isaac, only to send an angel to stay the old man's hand at the very last moment. Was that it? Was this a test of his faith? Or was he like Job, condemned to suffer needlessly simply because it was Grud's will. The questions assailed him and he could find no answers. He wanted to pray, but all his prayers had left him. He felt forsaken and cast out, until a new thought occurred to him.

If this was a test, perhaps it worked both ways. If he wished to know Grud's will, then he needed only to strike out against the child and the answers would become clear to him. Grud was all-powerful. If it was His will that the child be saved, when Lucas tried to harm it then Grud's hand would show itself. Like Abraham, Lucas would be prevented from completing the act. An angel would come, or Lucas would be struck blind, or the knife in his hand would turn to a serpent. Whatever the case, Grud's will in the matter would become clear.

He played the thought in his head. He tested its logic. Finally, he came to a decision.

He would kill the child. Then, all his questions would be answered.

From the outside the factory was rundown and decrepit, its dozens of boarded-up windows peering blindly at the night-time traffic of the skedway alongside it. As the two Judges pulled their bikes onto an exit ramp leading to the parking forecourt, Anderson was struck by how quickly the place had been claimed by urban decay. According to the information Bryson had given her during the ride over from Lindberg, Mayor McMunce's McMarvellous Burgers had closed its doors a little under five years ago. It had not weathered well. Where the walls had not already been scarred by juve scrawl and petty vandalism, the paint had peeled away revealing the crumbling grey surface of the plascrete underneath it. Weeds poked out from cracks in the forecourt. Illegally dumped garbage littered every open space. Even the cartoon figure of the company mascot she had seen in Lucas Verne's memories had suffered violation. The statue of Mayor McMunce on the factory roof was missing a limb: the hand which had once greeted passers-by with a cheery wave was broken off at the elbow.

In an attempt to prevent the perp from becoming alerted to their presence, the Judges had both cut their sirens three blocks earlier. Now, hoping the background noise of nearby traffic would serve to cover their approach, they switched off the engines of their Lawmasters and let their bikes glide silently into the forecourt.

"How do you want to play this?" Bryson whispered as he eased his bike to a halt beside her.

"Have you ever communicated telepathically before?" Anderson whispered back.

It feels like this, she told him, projecting the thoughts into his mind. *It's the best way for us to stay in touch without the perp hearing us. I'm letting you know now so you don't freak out when I use it inside. I've tuned in to your psychic wavelength. If you want to send a message back to me, you just have to think out the words in your head and I'll hear them*.

Check, Bryson's message came back.

His face looked uneasy. It was a common reaction among non-psychics to their first experience of telepathy. Undoubtedly, Bryson did not welcome the idea of a Psi-Judge being able to eavesdrop inside his head. Momentarily, Anderson could tell him she had only established a surface channel of communication between them: the street Judge had no reason to fear the exposure of his unguarded inner thoughts. In her experience though, she realised that if she brought the subject up at all it would simply

make things worse. Bryson would only assume she was reading his mind already, and immediately deny he had anything to hide. It was a no-win situation. Justice Department might like to paint them all as happy members of the same team, but sometimes the divide between Psi-Judges and their fellow Judges was so wide as to be almost unbridgeable.

Closing her eyes, she reached out to the currents of the psi-flux in search of the psychic signature of Lucas Verne. Assuming the perp was inside the factory, once Anderson entered the place she would need to be cautious in her use of her powers. It was difficult to stay aware of her physical surroundings when she accessed the psi-flux: she risked exposing herself to ambush, allowing the perp to sneak up on her while her senses were clouded. Here though, in the relative safety of the factory forecourt, she had Bryson to watch her back and she could use her powers freely.

The perp's inside, she told him, opening her eyes again. *And I can sense the baby. I can't get a definite fix on their location. We'll have to do a pattern search and work our way from the first floor upwards. We should split up to cover the ground more quickly. You go in the back way, I'll take the front, and we'll meet in the middle*.

Check, Bryson nodded. He was already holding his Lawgiver in his hand, cocked and ready.

Following the street Judge's example, Anderson pulled her own Lawgiver from her boot holster and eased off the safety behind the pistol's trigger. The standard issue Justice Department firearm in Mega-City One, the Lawgiver Mark Two was designed to give individual Judges the firepower to deal with virtually any situation. The gun had six ammunition options: Armour Piercing, Heatseeker, Hi-Explosive, Incendiary, Ricochet and Standard Execution rounds - controlled by an internal selector designed to respond to either vocal commands or a manual selection switch on the side of the magazine. It was also equipped with a non-lethal alternative in the form of a stun-shot energy pulse powered by the Lawgiver's own internal power supply. The stun-shot had a limited range, and its effects on its targets could be notoriously short-lived, but where possible Anderson preferred to bring her perps in alive. Especially when, as in the case of Lucas Verne, their psychological condition meant they couldn't be held responsible for their actions. Putting her finger to the selector switch, she set her Lawgiver to stun-shot.

We go in quiet, she reminded Bryson as they left their bikes behind and began to advance towards the factory. As an extra precaution, she switched off the radio unit on her belt to prevent the noise of any sudden calls from Control from giving them away. *The perp's unstable enough already - we don't want to spook him into doing something stupid. And, remember, the life of Garret Cooley is our main concern here. If possible, we take Lucas Verne alive. But if it comes down to having to kill him to save the baby, we go for the killshot. No question*.

Agreed, Bryson nodded again. *You ready?*

They had reached the outskirts of the old factory building. It was time for the two of them to go their separate ways. Anderson drew a deep breath, found her centre, and started to move towards the building's front entrance.

Ready, she told him. *Let's go*.

She only hoped they could come through this one without anybody having to die.

Inside, the factory was even more of a shambles than it appeared from its exterior. The chain and padlock holding the front doors closed had been broken open, indicating that was the way Lucas Verne had gained entrance. Sneaking soundlessly through the broad inner expanses of what had once been a busy factory floor, Anderson found she was alone in a dark and ominous environment in which every shadow seemed thick with implicit menace. She had a flashlight clipped to her belt, but wary of alerting the perp to her presence she was forced to forego its comfort. In its place, she relied on the dim radiance of street lights and moonlight that came in through the gaps between the boards covering the windows to guide her. It was slow and cautious work. The floor was strewn with rusting debris: a single misstep might cause her to reveal her position, or worse, slip and twist an ankle. The foreboding shapes of the factory machinery around her offered the perp a hundred different places in which to hide. The silence was oppressive. Uncomfortably, it occurred to her that if the perp had wanted to choose the perfect spot in which to ambush a Judge, he could not have picked a better location.

Suddenly, the silence was broken. She heard the distant noise of a baby crying.

Straining her ears to home in on the sound, Anderson was led past a row of dented munce bins and a broken conveyor belt to an area where the

factory's right wall turned a corner and opened out into the even broader expanses of what she guessed was the old main production line. Ahead, she could see a vague light. Drawing nearer, she saw it was coming from a metal staircase leading up to a second-storey gantry. Partway up the staircase, on a half-landing where the stairs turned back diagonally on their way to the gantry, she could see a man cradling a baby.

It was Lucas Verne.

Careful to avoid noise and stay to the shadows, she moved closer. Verne had hung a porta-light on a hook over the staircase railing, and as he paced back and forth on the landing with the baby in his arms Anderson saw the glint of a knife in his right hand. The perp seemed agitated, as though wrestling inwardly with some weighty dilemma.

Keeping them in her line of sight, Anderson advanced quietly toward the stairway until she reached a point where Verne was well within range of her Lawgiver. Given the fact he was holding the baby, it was clear she couldn't use a stun-shot to subdue the perp. According to the warning guidelines issued by Justice Department with the Lawgiver Mark Two, a stun-shot intended to disable an adult contained enough electrical amplitude to kill a child - never mind a three month-old infant. Equally, even as she switched the ammunition selector on the gun's magazine to allow it to fire standard execution rounds, she realised any attempt to kill or wound Verne would be just as risky. The staircase landing he was standing on was at least five metres above the ground. If she shot Verne and he dropped Garret Cooley, the fall would likely kill the baby. It seemed the safest course would be to try to persuade the perp to surrender.

An idea occurred to her. If she could surreptitiously perform a telepathic scan on Verne without his knowledge, she might gain insights that would make it easier to talk him down. At the same time he was obviously volatile, while the scan would cloud her awareness of the physical world and interfere with her ability to respond if he suddenly tried to harm the child.

She needed backup. Fast.

Bryson. Sending out a telepathic summons, she felt the presence of the street Judge's mind on the other side of the factory. *I need you here now! I've found the perp. He's on the landing of a staircase by the north-east wall. Get over here as fast you can, but keep it quiet and make sure you stay out of sight*.

Affirmative on that, Bryson responded. There was a pause. *Yeah, I can see a light up ahead. I should be there in two minutes*.

Up on the landing, the perp had abruptly stopped pacing. Forewarned by a sudden sense of disquiet, Anderson gently eased the flashlight from her belt and crept towards the foot of the staircase. Her instincts told her the perp had reached some kind of decision. She saw a movement in the hand that held the knife as Verne brought the blade closer to the baby's throat. Bryson was still at least a minute away.

For better or worse, it looked like she would have to deal with the situation on her own.

"Anderson, Psi Division!" Stepping out of the shadows she turned the flashlight on, training the beam on Verne with her left hand as she aimed her Lawgiver at him with the right. "Lucas Verne, you are under arrest! Drop the knife and put the baby down. Now!"

In response Verne stood motionless, his knife still hovering near the child's throat. Spotlighted in the glare of the flashlight, his eyes wild, his hair and beard in disarray, he looked the image of an Old Testament prophet. His brow creased in thought, he stared at her in silence.

"Did Grud send you?" he said at last. "Are you His angel?"

Awaiting her reply, Verne fell silent once more. The baby had stopped crying, as though waiting for her answer in the same state of expectation as his captor. Briefly, Anderson wondered whether she should try to play to the perp's delusions. But the stakes were high and she had no way of knowing how Verne would react. If she claimed to be an angel would he surrender, or would it make him more likely to harm the child? She decided her best course of action was to follow the procedures they had taught her at the Academy Of Law. Command the situation. Bark out orders. Don't give the perp time to think. Make it clear compliance is his only option.

"Drop the knife! You are under arrest! Put the baby down and step away from him! Do it! Now!"

"Are you an angel?" the perp was persistent. Her commands, and the fact she was pointing a gun at him, did not seem to faze him. "Is this a sign? Did Grud send you to save the child? Did He send you to stay my hand?"

Stalemate. It was as though the perp hardly registered the danger of the situation, as though the real world had less weight to him than whatever psycho-drama was playing out inside his head. There was a glassiness to his

expression: he wore the unresponsive thousand-metre stare of the confirmed fanatic.

"Did Grud send you?" he asked her again. "Are you an angel?"

Anderson didn't like the way this whole thing was going. It felt like the perp was building up his courage, his emotions slowly burning, getting ready to explode in a violent crescendo at any moment. The knife was barely a centimetre away from the baby's throat. Conflicting strategies warred within her: should she try to talk him down, play along with madness, or take the shot and pray for the best?

She saw movement at the periphery of her vision. It was Bryson. The street Judge was on the other side of the staircase. He had worked his way behind the perp, his Lawgiver raised to aim up at Lucas Verne as he moved to take a position just below the landing. Verne had not noticed him yet: he had eyes only for Anderson.

"Are you an angel?" the perp demanded. He was growing impatient, and Anderson realised the time for a decision was fast approaching. Whatever she was going to do, she needed to do it quickly. "Are you an angel? Tell me."

Bryson, she contacted the street Judge telepathically. She kept her eyes on the perp, wary of any sudden movements. *I need you to advance until you're standing directly below the perp. And holster your weapon. You're going to need both hands free*.

What are you planning to do?, Bryson asked her. But she had no time to answer him. On the landing, his back turned to Bryson and still unaware of the street Judge's presence, Lucas Verne was becoming angry.

"Are you an angel?" he shouted, his body shifting in ill-concealed agitation. As he moved, his knife inched closer to the baby's throat. "Tell me! Tell me now or-"

"I'm an angel, Lucas," she said, silently hoping she could play the role right. "My name is Cassandra. Grud sent me with a message for you. He says the baby is not the Messiah. You don't need to hurt hi-"

"Liar!" Verne roared at her. "You're a liar! Grud didn't send you! Do you think you can fool me?"

He lifted the baby in his arms, jostling the child awake. Disturbed, the baby resumed his crying.

"Do you think I don't know that this is the true Messiah?" Verne was raving now, spittle flying from his mouth as his words rebounded in harsh

echoes from the walls and machinery around them. "You think I don't know what that means? Billions of people are going to die. The Apocalypse is coming, and I'm the only one who can stop it! Me! Lucas Verne! It's up to me to save the world! I see that now!"

"Lucas!" In an attempt to get the perp to snap out of it, Anderson shouted his name. It was like his thought process was a freight train bearing down on its destination. She had to try to derail it. "Listen to me! You don't know what you're-"

"No! I won't listen!" the perp shrieked at her, his eyes gleaming in mad zeal. "You're not an angel - you came here to trick me! But I know what's really going on! I understand everything! I see it all! It's time now! It's time to save the world!"

The knife moved in the perp's hand to press against the child's throat. The baby cried. Anderson screamed.

"Lucas! No!"

Running out of options, she did what she had to.

She took the shot.

It happened in slow motion.

Her shot hit the perp in the chin, a red flower of blood exploding from the crown of his head as the bullet angled upwards. The perfect killshot: Verne was dead before he knew it. The knife dropped from his hands. His body slumped against the metal banister behind him. Anderson held her breath.

She held her breath. As Verne fell back against the railing, his body twisted. The baby slid out of his arms and over the side. Verne collapsed onto the landing. The baby was crying.

She held her breath. The baby was falling in mid-air, wailing. His body turned in the air as gravity pulled him towards the factory floor. Below him, Bryson was waiting with his arms held open. Anderson felt a bead of sweat run down her neck.

She held her breath.

"Nice catch," she said afterwards.

"I can't believe you did that!" Bryson's face was aghast. He held the crying baby cupped in his hands as though the child were made glass. "Drokk! What if I'd slipped or..."

"You didn't." Moving towards him, she inspected the child in his arms. Pulling open the baby's pyjama top, she lightly pressed a finger to his chest. The heart was beating a strong, rapid rhythm. She checked the tiny limbs, the neck, the ribs, the head. There didn't seem to be any fractures. "I'll admit, it was a gamble. But we'd run out of options. You saw what the perp was like - there was no talking him down. If I hadn't taken the shot when I did, he would have cut the kid's throat. At least, we were able to save one life here - even if we couldn't save two."

She glanced up at Verne's body on the landing, blood dripping from his head wound and seeping through the gaps between the stairs to fall onto the factory floor. Even now, she regretted the fact she had needed to kill him.

"I'd have taken the stun-shot if I could have," she said. "But I couldn't. Not without running the risk of killing Garret Cooley."

"Control to Anderson!" Abruptly, the radio unit on her belt burst into noisy life. Without consciously realising she was doing it, she had already automatically switched her radio back on the instant the crisis with Verne had passed. It was habit as much as anything: when you were a Judge in Mega-City One, the end of one crisis inevitably merged with the beginning of another.

Turning away from Bryson and the baby, she took the call.

"Anderson receiving, Control. Over."

"We've been trying to get through to you for nearly half an hour," the dispatcher said testily. "You're supposed to notify us if you go off-comm."

"Exigent circumstances, Control. A hostage situation. I'm free now though. What's up?"

"We had a call from Psi Division," the reply came back. "They want you over at Omar House ASAP."

"Acknowledged. Tell them I'm on my way. ETA: thirty minutes. Anderson over and out." She placed the radio back on her belt.

Omar House was the headquarters of Psi Division. A summons there, especially one pulling her away from her normal duties, likely meant that there was trouble brewing.

"I have to go," she told Bryson. "Psi Division business. I assume you can handle things from here on in?"

"Handle things? You mean..." Bryson's face was a picture of spluttering outrage. "Anderson, you can't just leave me here... holding the baby?!"

"Street Division training doesn't include how to change diapers, I take it?" she smiled wickedly at him. With the crisis passed, she could not help having a little bit of fun at the street Judge's expense. "Don't worry, I'll put a call in for Med-Judge backup on my way out. In the meantime though, a word to the wise about babies. I hear the best way to stop them crying is by singing to them."

"Singing..?" Bryson took the bait - hook, line and sinker. "You can't be serious!"

"Hey, I'm no more an expert than you are." Shrugging, Anderson turned away and began to head towards the factory forecourt. "But you're probably going to have to wait at least fifteen minutes until the Med-Judges get here. If you want to spend all that time listening to a baby crying, it's up to you."

She was nearly at the factory door when she heard the first sounds of singing behind her. Bryson didn't have much of a voice - and, even if his voice had been better, she got the impression he would have had a hard time holding a tune. Still, as the faltering strains of the street Judge's chosen melody followed her across the building, Anderson was forced to smile. Given the choice of lullaby, she would have liked to stay longer and hear the whole song, but she was needed elsewhere.

"Well, I'll tell you what I want, what I really-really want!"

"Tell me what you want, what you really-really want!"

"I wann-ah! I wann-ah! I wann-ah! I wann-ah! I wann-ah..."

It was funny really, but she would have never expected a street Judge to be a fan of classical music.

FOUR

RIDING SHOTGUN

"You have requested a floor in the restricted access zone," the elevator told her. "Please insert your building keycard and enter your personal identification number if you wish to continue."

Suppressing a yawn, Anderson pulled the Justice Department override card from her utility belt and pushed it into the keycard slot. It had been a long night, and she was tired. Her original double-shift had ended two hours ago, but it had now been extended into a third eight-hour segment. After riding over to Omar House, she had been giving a new assignment. A homicide at the Franz Kafka Office-Plex in Sector 45. The victim had been killed on the two-hundredth floor, but so far the elevator seemed unwilling to take her any higher than one hundred and ninety.

"Thank you, Judge," the tone of the elevator's voice changed after she inserted her card. It almost purred. "You are now cleared to progress." She felt a vague sensation of movement as the elevator began to rise.

The override card was standard issue: as much a part of a Judge's regular arsenal as the Lawgiver and daystick. It allowed Judges to override locks and gain access to any building or vehicle in the city. Removing the card, Anderson yawned once more. Before leaving Omar, she had been able to grab a few minutes in a sleep-machine or Total Relaxation Inducer. In theory, ten minutes inside a TRI was worth the same as a full night's sleep. In practice, Anderson had always found sleep machine sessions to be a poor substitute for natural rest. Admittedly, she no longer felt as mind-numbed and weary as she had when she had entered the machine, but she felt none of the freshness and new perspective that a few hours' real sleep would have given her. Instead, she currently felt like three day-old, re-heated munce.

I can see why they say you should only use a TRI in an emergency, she thought. If we went back to using them all the time, it wouldn't be long before the Big Meg was being policed by sleep-deprived zombies. She smiled inwardly. Though, given some of the stone-faced Judges I've worked with over the years, you have to wonder.

The elevator doors opened, its smooth electronic voice telling her to "have a nice day" as she stepped from inside it. There was a Tek-Judge waiting for her in the hallway, wearing a scanalyser eyepiece clipped to the

side of his helmet. Glancing down at his uniform, she saw his name was Tolsen.

"Anderson?" the Tek-Judge extended a hand in welcome. "Control said you were on your way. They've assigned the street Judge who was working the case back to normal rotation. I'm supposed to get you up to speed, then it's up to you how you want to proceed with it. The body's this way."

Gesturing for her to follow him, the Tek-Judge led her to one of the offices off the hallway. As they stepped through the doorway, Anderson read the name on the ersatz brass plaque mounted on the outside of the office door. Nales & Associates, Import and Export.

"The victim has been identified as James Nales, the company CEO," Tolsen said to her. "He was working late in his office. We found balance sheets on the screen of the computer at his desk. Looks like he was going through the accounts."

The body lay on the floor in the outer office. It was covered in an opaque plasteen sheet, with a couple of Judge-auxiliaries hovering around it like bored mourners at a funeral that had run on longer than expected.

"Has the body been examined by a Med-Judge yet?" she asked Tolsen.

"The Med-Judge has been and gone," he said. "He got called away on another case, but asked me to tell you his findings. Pending a full autopsy, he's ruled the cause of death as asphyxia resulting from manual strangulation. We were supposed to be shipping the body back to the Sector House morgue for the post mortem, but I figured you'd want to see it first."

He nodded towards one of the auxiliaries, who pulled back the sheet. Looking down, Anderson found she was staring at the body of a thickset man somewhere in his late thirties. He might have once been almost handsome, but death had made him less appealing. His neck was covered in broad ugly bruises. His eyes were red with internal haemorrhages and protruded from their sockets like blisters that were ready to pop. His tongue lolled from his mouth, distended and purple. It was the condition of the dead man's chest, though, that most immediately drew her attention. His shirt-front had been torn open, revealing a grisly sight. The killer had left a gruesome message carved bloodily into the naked flesh of the victim's torso. She saw six ragged shaking words, snaking down from under the victim's collarbone to just above his groin.

It read: Your sins will find you out.

Whether it was intended as a message to the victim, or to the Judges, Anderson could not be sure. Experience told her that postmortem mutilation of a victim's body was never a good sign. It smacked of ritual, setting the crime apart from the usual humdrum of murder. It was difficult to tell at this early stage, but she was keenly aware she might well be present at what could later turn out to be the early stages of a serial killing case. She did not like the look of what she could see before her.

Then again, she had not liked the look of the entire case from the very beginning...

"You want me to spy on another Psi-Judge?" Anderson said in disbelief.

She was sitting in the office of Senior Psi-Judge Vinley. Upon her arrival at Omar House after the Cooley baby rescue, she had been told Vinley needed to see her to discuss an urgent matter. A low-level pre-cog, Vinley's psychic powers were rumoured to be so negligible he had been permanently seconded to bureaucratic duties, including overseeing the organisation of duty rosters and the allocation of Psi Division resources. Responsibilities, she soon learned, which had led directly to the reason for their meeting.

It was the nature of the new assignment he had for her that had led to her outburst.

"You always did have a tendency to the melodramatic, Anderson," Vinley told her. He was a small dour man with an uneven complexion, his characteristic air of perpetual glumness scarcely alleviated by the bright thatch of flaming red hair on top of his head. He grimaced. "It's a straightforward enough matter, really. Questions have been raised about a Psi-Judge's performance, and we simply want you to ride shotgun and supervise the investigation she's currently working on. To hear you talking, you'd think I'd just asked you to para-drop into East-Meg Two and take out the entire Diktatorat."

"You also asked me to report back to you on her emotional state. That makes it a lot more than a 'straightforward matter'."

"Really?" Vinley raised a scarlet eyebrow towards her. "I would have thought it was very simple. We're Psi-Judges, Anderson: we have a duty to the citizens of the Mega-City One-"

"Spare me the recruiting speeches, Vinley," Anderson cut him off. "I already gave at the office."

"Droll. I take it that's an example of your famous sense of humour." He smiled at her, mirthlessly. "But to continue what I was saying: we have a duty to the citizens of Mega-City One and to the command structure of the Justice Department we both serve. This isn't a democracy, Anderson. We're Judges. We follow orders. That applies as much to me as it does to you. To be honest, given a choice, I would have picked another Psi-Judge for this assignment. But it wasn't my decision. And the Psi-Chief said he trusted you to get the job done right."

"Shenker? He authorised this?"

"That's correct." For an instant, Vinley's expression became almost smug. "As I was telling you, questions have been raised about the performance and emotional state of a Psi-Judge. That makes it a serious matter. It could be the whole thing has been blown out of proportion. It could be you'll be back here in a few hours to tell me we don't have anything to worry about. Believe me, if that turns out to be the case, I'll be ecstatic. In the meantime though, so long as a single iota of doubt remains, we have to investigate."

"No, you mean I have to investigate," Anderson said, not without a trace of bitterness. If the order came from Psi-Chief Shenker, she had no way out of it. Still, it rankled that she was effectively being told to spy on a fellow Psi-Judge. "I don't see you jumping up and asking to join the party."

"Those weren't my orders," Vinley shrugged in indifference. "If it helps, try to look upon it the same way you would if you were assigned to assess the performance of a Psi-Cadet during a routine training exercise. Think of yourself as a mentor, not as a spy. Either way, the job has to be done. This is Psi Division. If we think there's the potential for a bad apple in our ranks, we don't have the luxury of handing the matter over to the Special Judicial Squad the way the other divisions do. The SJS just aren't equipped to handle a situation like this. Remember, the worst-case scenario here is that we're dealing with a Psi-Judge who is emotionally unstable. A Judge like that is a danger both to herself and others. She could even go rogue. And I'm sure I don't have to tell you just how much damage a rogue psychic can do."

There was a pause while Vinley waited for her to respond. Brooding in her chair, Anderson felt an acute sense of discomfort. The worst thing about it was she knew Vinley was right.

Any rogue psychic was bad news, but the idea of a Psi-Judge going rogue was so appalling it almost did not bear thinking about. It was not just a

matter of the damage a psychic could do with her own powers. There was also the fact that psychics were uniquely vulnerable to psychic possession. The psi-flux and its attendant dimensions were full of all manner of hostile inhuman entities that liked nothing better than to grab a compliant human host and spend time in the material plane, having fun. Unfortunately, the fun in question generally involved inflicting as much suffering on mankind as possible. Anderson only had to think back over the recent history of the city to be reminded of the murderous results of such incidents.

Take the Necropolis Event, for example. Fourteen years ago, a group of preternatural entities had used a captured Psi-Judge to create a psychic bridge between their own realm and Earth. Next, they had taken control of the minds of most of Mega-City One's Judges and set them to work murdering the citizens they were sworn to protect. By the time Anderson and others had defeated the entities, the final death toll had been in the millions. If there was the remotest possibility of a Psi-Judge going rogue, then she could see why Psi-Chief Shenker had ordered that an assessment should be made immediately.

Yet, still, it felt wrong to her. She had been through Psi-School and the Academy of Law. Barring a brief period of sabbatical, she had served as a Psi-Judge her entire adult life. Psi Division was the closest thing she had to a family. Her fellow Psi-Judges were more than just colleagues. She counted a number of them as friends and confidantes, but her broader feelings toward the division went beyond such simple boundaries. Whenever she was introduced to a Psi-Judge she had never met before, she instantly felt an invisible bond of shared experience between them - a bond that existed even in her dealings with a sullen-faced jobsworth like Vinley. In the end, she was Psi Division right down to the core.

Now, they wanted her to turn informer. They wanted her to forego the normal bounds of trust and loyalty, to monitor another Psi-Judge, and turn her in if she found her unfit for duty. The entire situation rubbed Anderson the wrong way, but in the end she realised she would do what they asked. However Vinley chose to phrase it, it was not simply a matter of following orders, or abiding by the chain of command. She thought of her dead friend, Corey. An empath, Corey had committed suicide when the pressures of being a Psi-Judge had grown too much for her. For years afterwards, guilt had weighed heavily on Anderson's shoulders. If-onlys and might-have-beens had plagued her mind. She and Corey had been so close: how could

she have missed the telltale signs of stress and burnout? How was it she hadn't been able to see Corey's intentions in time to save her? They were questions without easy answers, but they added a new perspective to the decision before her.

Yeah, I'll do it, she thought. I'll do it for Corey.

"All right, you sold me," she said to Vinley at last.

Even as she spoke, she noticed that Vinley had already called up the service record of the Psi-Judge in question on his desk computer and had turned the display screen around for Anderson to see it. Apparently, he had anticipated her answer and was ready to give her a full briefing.

It looked like he was a better pre-cog than anyone had credited.

"The killer is a giant," Tolsen said. The sheet had been placed back on the body, and now the Tek-Judge had begun to brief her on the facts established by the physical evidence.

"A giant?" Anderson smiled at him. "At least that should make him easier to find. Are we talking about the 'fee-fi-fo-fum' kind, or a friendly one like the green guy who advertises canned synthi-veg in the Tri-D commercials?"

"I mean he suffers from gigantism, Anderson," Tolsen regarded her closely as though he wasn't quite sure whether she was being facetious. "We were able to calculate his stride-length from the soft impressions of his footprints on the office carpet. That, and the size of the handspan indicated by the bruise patterns on the victim's neck, would put the perp standing at somewhere between two-point-three and two-point-five metres in height."

"Two and a half metres tall? So he stands out in a crowd. What else?"

"He's strong. Phenomenally so. He snapped two spinal vertebrae in the victim's neck while he was strangling him. Then, there's the matter of the elevator. This is a high-security building. You noticed you need authorisation to go anywhere above the one hundred and ninetieth floor in the elevator?"

"I did. So the perp used the stairwells?"

"No," Tolsen shook his head. "We checked the footage from the surveillance cams inside all the stairwells and came up empty. Instead, I found evidence he had been in the elevator shaft. The walls of the shaft are lined with five-millimetre-thick plastisteel panels and coated with teflon-plus to reduce friction. Somebody has pulled several of the panels apart, bending the edges back so as to increase the gap between them. It looks like

the perp rode the elevator up to one-ninety, then made handholds for himself so he could climb up the last ten floors inside the shaft."

"He bent solid plastisteel?" Anderson whistled quietly. "That makes him pretty damn strong. You sure we're not looking for a robot or an alien?"

"As sure as I can be." Opening one of the pouches on his utility belt, Tolsen produced two transparent plasteen evidence baggies and handed them to her. Inside each one she saw a few long strands of hair. "We found two samples of hair - one on the wall of the elevator shaft, and the other on the victim's body. You know about hair DNA?"

"I take it that's a trick question," Anderson said. "Hair isn't made of living cells. It doesn't have DNA."

"That's right," the Tek-Judge nodded. "If you want to get DNA from a hair sample, it has to have skin tags - little pieces of tissue that stay attached after the hair is pulled off or falls out. Unfortunately, neither of these samples has them. However, after analysing the colour and follicle dimensions, I can tell you it's human and that there's a ninety-nine-point-nine per cent probability both samples came from the same person. Unless somebody else has been crawling around the elevator shafts recently, that means it came from your perp."

"So he's a brunette and he wears his hair long?" She passed the baggies back to Tolsen. "What about his strength, then? You thinking he's a mutant?"

"That would be my best guess," Tolsen agreed as he placed the baggies back in their pouch. "Of course it could be he's a cyborg, or that he's taking some kind of adrenal stimulant to boost his strength. But, combined with the fact of his gigantism, I'd say some kind of genetic mutation was the most likely culprit. Either way, he can tear plastisteel apart with his bare hands. When you catch up with this guy - assuming he is a guy - I wouldn't take any chances."

"You think the perp might be a woman?" Anderson cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Without a viable DNA sample to identify his gender, I wouldn't rule anything out at this stage," Tolsen shrugged. "In terms of what else the evidence says, I can tell you the perp doesn't wear gloves. We found partial fingerprints on the inside of the elevator doors and on the handle of the door leading to the office. We ran them through the database and came up blank - either the perp is from out of town, or he's slipped through the net and

somehow escaped being printed. Also, from the wound angle of the cuts he used to write on the victim's chest, I'd say he was right-handed. Oh, and I sent a Tek-team down into the elevator shaft to track the perp backwards and try to establish how he entered the building. You never know, if we can follow his trail back far enough we may get lucky and find footage of him on an exterior surveillance cam."

"All right, so I take it that covers everything you can tell me so far about the perp?" Seeing Tolsen nod in response to her question, Anderson continued. "What about the victim? What can you tell me about him?"

"Now, that's where things get really interesting," the Tek-Judge told her. "Fingerprints and retinal scans confirm the victim's name as James Victor Nales. According to the Justice Department database, he's thirty-eight years of age, and he set up the 'Nales & Associates' company three years ago. Their main business is importing consumer goods and industrial raw materials into the Big Meg from the other city-states. They do a lot of business with Ciudad Barranquilla, but at first glance it all seems to be on the up-and-up. Nales pays his taxes regularly. He's never been in trouble with the law. Everything in his file indicates he's a model citizen."

"Why do I get the feeling there's a 'but' coming on?" asked Anderson.

"Well, first there's this..." Moving over to a nearby table, Tolsen retrieved another transparent evidence bag - this time, much larger - and held it up for Anderson to see it. Inside it, she saw a palm-sized pistol, its grip and other surfaces lightly dusted with fingerprint powder. "My best guess is, Nales must have heard what he thought was a prowler and took this gun with him when he went to investigate."

"It looks like a laspistol."

"It is. It's a scaled-down Walther Mitsubishi LPK Mark One, Pattern J. You're looking at pretty much the state of the art, as far as handy-sized killing goes. This is probably the only pistol on the market that can match the Lawgiver for raw power, but at less than half the size and weight. They call 'em 'Judgekillers' on the street. Small enough for a perp to hide under his pants waistband, yet powerful enough to melt a hole in a Judge's helmet and drill through the brain inside it. Quiet, too. Somebody could fire one in the next room, and you wouldn't even hear it. Assassins love them. They're light, accurate, and lethal. If Nales had managed to get off a shot with this baby, you have to figure the giant would be one left lying dead on the office floor, not him."

"Seems a lot of gun for a respectable businessman to be carrying," Anderson said. "Did he have a permit?"

"No. Naturally, Justice Department takes a dim view of citizens owning this kind of firepower. Even if Nales had applied for a permit, he never would have got one." Tolsen turned to place the gun back on the table before moving towards her once more. "What's more, buying a gun like that on the black market would cost you at least twenty-five thousand credits."

"So this isn't some anxious citizen buying a cheap gun because he's scared of burglars?" Anderson paused a moment as she thought the matter through. "If Nales laid out that kind of change, it's because he thought he had reason to fear his life was in danger. Which, in turn, means he's probably not the model citizen he appeared to be."

"My thoughts exactly." Kneeling down beside the victim's body, Tolsen pulled back the sheet and pointed a finger at the dead man's face. "The Med-Judge noticed something as well. You see how taut the skin appears on Nales's cheeks and forehead? Now, look at the side of his head here, where the skin meets the hairline. See these minute creases in the surface of the skin? Apparently, they are all telltale signs that Nales has had a rejuve job - most likely several of them, in fact. And that's not all. Remember, according to our files, James Nales is supposed to be thirty-eight years old. But based on bone density and the state of his inner organs, the Med-Judge estimates he was at least eighty."

"Eighty?" Staring down at the dead man, Anderson found it hard to believe the Tek-Judge's assertion. "He looks barely forty."

"On the outside, maybe. But, inside, the organs don't lie. The Med-Judge said he'd be able to tell more once he'd performed a full postmortem, but he was adamant about Nales's real age. He was at least eighty, maybe older. I took a sample of Nales's DNA and forwarded it to MAC, the Justice Department mainframe, to see if it matches anything in the city's genetic database. But I'm still waiting to hear back on that." For the first time since they had met, the Tek-Judge smiled. "You see, I told you the victim was interesting."

"Interesting?" Anderson looked at him in askance. "That doesn't cover the half of it. We've got a gigantic perp with superhuman strength, who climbs up an elevator shaft to strangle a man with his bare hands. Then, we've got a victim who probably isn't what he appeared to be, and is forty-odd years older than he looks. Talk about the plot thickening. All we need now is a

little old lady with a Brit-Cit accent and we'd have the makings of a storyline for one of the mystery shows on Tri-D."

Looking down at the body, she sighed and shook her head, then turned to gaze at Tolsen again.

"Okay, so that's the perp and the victim covered," she said. "Did anything else show up in the forensics that might help explain what went on?"

"No, that's it," Tolsen replied. "You know everything I do."

"All right. Not to seem rude, but I'd appreciate it if everyone left the room. I'm going to perform a psi-scan on the victim and there's a higher chance of success if there are no distractions."

Anderson pulled one of her gloves off and knelt down beside the body. She stretched out her hand towards the dead man's forehead.

"It looks like there's only one way we're going to get any real answers here. And that's by asking James Nales himself."

"Psi-Judge Myrna Lang," Vinley said, reading aloud from the Justice Department service record on the display screen of his computer. "Date of birth: 14/1/2100. Graduated from Psi-School and the Academy of Law: 18/3/2126. Specialisation: Telepathy. Current posting: Psi Division, standard assignment..."

"Graduated 2126?" Anderson cut him off. Staring at the 2-D photo included with Lang's comp-file, she saw a slim pretty young woman with short mousey hair and a scattering of freckles across her cheeks. "She's a rookie Psi-Judge who's been on the streets barely three months and, already, you're thinking of throwing her to the wolves?"

"No one mentioned throwing her anywhere, Anderson." Vinley pursed his lips in disapproval. "I've explained it all already: we want an experienced Psi-Judge to ride with her on a case and assess her performance. Normally, we'd leave it until her regularly scheduled performance appraisal to make any kind of decision. Unfortunately, there have been complaints."

"What kind of complaints?"

"It's all here. See for yourself." Scrolling through the records, Vinley tapped a finger on the screen for emphasis. "Rudeness. Insubordination. Failure to Comply with Judicial Guidelines. Incorrect Sentencing. The list goes on." He raised a hand in admonishment. "And, before you say it, Anderson: I know what it's like out there. I know when Psi-Judges work

with other Judges there are bound to be clashes - especially when it comes to working with Street Division. But Lang is setting new records in that regard. In her first ten weeks on the job she's managed to accumulate more disciplinary complaints than the average Psi-Judge could manage in an entire year. Granted, Psi-Judges are a valuable resource, and that sometimes encourages the powers-that-be to ignore our more colourful eccentricities so long as we achieve results." He gave a pointed glance in Anderson's direction. "But this goes beyond that. Frankly, there have been questions about Lang's temperament from the start."

"How so?" Anderson asked him.

"Lang was eleven years old before her psychic potential was discovered. Usually, of course, candidates are enrolled into Psi-School at five years of age. And, not just because they have fifteen years of training to go through before they become Psi-Judges. Once you are identified as having that potential, any hope of a normal life goes out the window. A Psi-Judge has to leave his past behind. He has to say goodbye to his family and friends forever, and be willing to let the Law and Psi Division take their place. It's easier to make a break like that at an early age. When you are eleven years old, like Lang, it can be difficult to forget the fact you once had a family. Some people deal with these problems better than others. But not Lang. Her psych-file indicates she shows every sign of what the Department shrinks like to call 'separation displacement'."

"I've heard of it," Anderson said. "They warned us against it in the Academy. They said it's easy to displace your anger at being separated from your family into a resentment against Psi Division, or Justice Department, or even against your own powers. All the things you blame for taking you away from your old life."

"That's right," Vinley's voice had become grave. "I'm sure you see how a Psi-Judge who harbours a deep-seated resentment against Psi Division and Justice Department might represent a cause for disquiet. I'm not saying at this stage Lang presents any kind of definite danger to herself or others. It's merely a question of taking precautions. Apparently, her tutors at Psi-School considered her a borderline candidate for full-eagle status, but the city's desperate need for Psi-Judges encouraged Justice Department to override their concerns. Now, Lang's recent behaviour and her sloppiness about her work has caused the same questions about her suitability for the

job to be raised once more. And that was before the case she's working on at the moment brought everything to a head."

"I don't like to say it," Anderson grimaced. "But we are all Psi-Judges here. If there are questions about Lang's attitude to the job, isn't there an easier way to answer them?"

"You mean, couldn't we simply get another Psi-Judge to perform a deep telepathic scan on Lang and assess her emotional state that way?" When it came to precognition, so far tonight Vinley was hitting the bullseye every time. He shook his head. "No, it wouldn't work. Lang is a telepath herself. She could block off parts of her mind from the scan and the examining telepath might not even notice. Then, there's the problem that such an intrusive technique might actually encourage Lang to resent Psi Division, even if she doesn't already."

"So we're back with yours truly playing spy." Seeing Vinley about to protest, Anderson sighed and sarcastically rolled her eyes. "All right then, we call it 'mentoring' if that makes you happy. Either way, you're asking me to be the one who potentially wields the axe. It stinks, Vinley. But, yes, I'll do it - no doubt in my own colourfully eccentric way." She paused, then turned directly to business. "All right, so you said the case Lang is working on brought matters to a head. I take it that means I'll be working on it with her. What is it?"

"A homicide." Vinley scrolled further down through the records on his computer screen and highlighted a section of text. Glancing at it, Anderson could see it was a memo of complaint from the graveyard shift Watch Commander in nearby Sector 45. The screen was too far away for Anderson to read it properly, but it was clear from what little she could read that the Judge who had written it had been seething with anger.

"At 22.39 tonight, a routine call came in from Sector Control requesting Psi-Judge assistance in investigating a murder at the Franz Kafka Office-Plex," Vinley said. "In accordance with standard rotation, Lang was assigned to the case. The street Judge on the scene needed somebody to perform a psi-scan on the victim's body. But when Lang performed the scan, the results seemed to contradict every piece of forensic evidence that had been collected by the Teks. An argument ensued. When the street Judge called the results of Lang's scan into question, she responded with a number of expletives directed at her fellow Judges - of which, I'm told, the phrase 'go drokk yourselves' was the mildest."

"That's it?" Anderson asked. "All this because a Psi-Judge lost her temper and used some choice words? It sounds like a reprimand offence, at most."

"It's not about her language, Anderson. It's about the quality of her work. The results of Lang's scan were so off-kilter it raised questions about her reliability."

"But the results of psi-scans performed in the bodies of murder victims are notoriously unreliable," Anderson said. "Believe me, I know. You're reading the last moments of a person's life. Their experiences are always distorted by fear and pain. They don't understand what's happening to them. The experience of the point of death can easily get jumbled up with old memories of the past, with desperate fantasies, or incongruous thoughts and sensations. It's no wonder you sometimes get all kinds of strange and dubious results."

"I'm well aware it's not an exact science, Anderson," Vinley replied. "But the results Lang came up with are, frankly, ridiculous. I don't have all the details of the case to hand. However, it is my understanding the killer managed to gain entrance to the top floor of a high-security building to commit the crime. The victim was in his thirties, physically fit, and armed with a pistol. The killer surprised him, strangled him and broke his neck, then mutilated the body post mortem, before making good his escape. Now, I'm sure you would agree, the fact the killer achieved these things is a sign he possesses certain qualities: ruthlessness, physical strength, intelligence, a coolness under pressure, etc. Yet, the results of Lang's scan indicated precisely the opposite."

"So? Don't hold me in suspense, Vinley. What were the scan's results?"

In response to the question, Vinley leaned forward across the desk and fixed her with a morose and glowering stare.

"According to Psi-Judge Lang," he said, "the murder was committed by a child."

There was a sound from the outer office; the metal shriek of a door lock being forced wide against its will. Acting with a smoothness built on years of experience, his hand went to the top drawer of his desk. The drawer was open and the gun was in his hand without him even needing to think of it. He stood, and advanced quietly to his office door, feeling the protesting groan of his joints at the sudden movement. The face which greeted him in

the mirror each morning was so young and new, he sometimes almost forget just how old he really was.

He listened at the door and heard nothing. For a moment, he considered whether to call for help. He could stay in the safety of his office, take cover behind his desk, and wait to see if the intruder in the outer room decided to risk coming in there after him. But the idea sat poorly with him. Granted, he was an old man, but he had always dealt with such matters directly. Besides, if he left it to others to solve his problems, the rumour might start to get around that he was going soft. In his world, it was a short run from rumours like that to a sentence of death.

He pulled the door open swiftly. Too late, it occurred to him he had made himself the perfect target. He was silhouetted in the doorway, the lights of his office burning brightly behind him. He should have turned them off before he opened the door. Age, it seemed, had robbed his instincts of some of their sharpness. Silently cursing, he stepped quickly into the outer office. Ahead, the room was dark. Acutely aware of the vulnerability of his position, he resolved to spit in the Devil's eye and seize control of the initiative.

"Who's there?" he called out.

He strode forward, fearless, into the darkness. It felt like the old days, when he had done his own killing instead of farming the job out to hired guns.

"Who's there?" he called out again.

The room was silent, but he knew he was not alone. He was being watched. He felt it in the hairs at the back of his neck.

"I know you're there." He waited, eyes keenly scanning the darkness, waiting for his unseen adversary to give himself away. "I can hear you. I can hear you breathing."

The last part was a lie, but it was a trick that had served him well in the past. Briefly, he wondered who the intruder might be. Not an assassin, that much was clear. If this had been a hit, they would have come in with guns blazing, instead of skulking around in the dark. Most likely a burglar then. Some cheap street punk had picked the wrong office to break into. Now, he would make him pay for the mistake with his life.

"The Judges are on the way," he lied again, trying to draw the intruder out. "I called them."

He moved forward, past a small table with a lamp on it. Unconsciously, his eyes strayed to the lamp. Perhaps he should turn it on...

There was movement in the darkness. A blurred shape rose behind a desk and hurtled towards him. He tried to bring the pistol to bear. It was too late. He felt his fingers splinter as the gun was knocked from his hand. He tried to scream, but there were two huge hands around his throat. He felt his body lifted into the air, his feet flailing uselessly beneath him.

Pressure. He could not breathe. The hands around his throat squeezed tighter. He clawed desperately at the intruder's arms, trying to break his grip. The hands at his throat were too strong. The world seemed to fade and blacken around the edges. His body began to shake with uncontrollable tremors. Horror-struck, he realised he was dying.

No! It was impossible! He couldn't die! Not like this! He was important. A man of power and influence. A man of will. He couldn't go out this way! He was...

Abruptly, through the darkening haze of his vision, he saw the face of his killer. A young boy, no more than seven or eight years of age, his face set in determined and vengeful lines. The face looked vaguely familiar, but he could not place it. He saw the boy's mouth move, but he could not hear the words above the thunder squall rush of blood inside his head. The boy's eyes burned with bitter rage. They seemed to bore into his very soul.

He was dying. The world was growing dim and dark.

The last thing he saw was the boy smiling...

"Anderson!"

Pressure... The darkening haze... Hands tight around his throat...

"Anderson!"

The boy was smiling... His eyes burned with bitter rage... They bored into his soul...

"Anderson!"

She was kneeling beside the body... The dead man's forehead cool against her palm... She could hear someone choking... Choking... She could hear herself choking...

"Anderson!"

Opening her eyes, Anderson drew back from the body with a start. She gasped hungrily for breath, feeling an intense rush of relief as the air reached her lungs. The contact was broken; lingering memories of death

and murder fading away like mist before the rising sun. Still groggy in the aftermath of the psi-scan, she looked about her to regain her bearings. She was in the outer office, the body of James Nales lying on the floor before her. The Tek-Judge, Tolsen, was kneeling beside her, his hand raised to her shoulder in a gesture of concern.

"Are you Okay?" he asked her. "You were in the middle of the psi-scan when you suddenly started choking. For a minute there, I thought you were going to need CPR."

"Psychosomatic transference," she banished his concern with a shrug and a tired smile. "It happens sometimes with a psi-scan. You get so caught up in the victim's last moments, you experience the same physical sensations they did. It only happens when the psychic traces from the scan are particularly vivid." She felt gingerly at her own throat. "In this case, maybe a little bit too vivid."

"You're sure you're Okay then?" The Tek-Judge seemed uncomfortable, almost embarrassed.

"I'm fine," she said. "Though I appreciate the concern. Really."

As they both began to stand, Anderson abruptly noticed a new figure had entered the room. A Psi-Judge stood just inside the doorway, her arms crossed in front of her, a scattering of freckles on her cheeks and her mouth set in stoic, unwelcoming line. Anderson recognised her immediately.

"You must be Lang?" Anderson said.

The newcomer nodded, her expression guarded and wary.

"Well, there's good news and there's bad news," Anderson told her, smiling in an attempt to put the other woman at her ease. "The good news is I got exactly the same results from my psi-scan as you did from yours. According to the victim's memories, the killer was a child. The bad news is, we already had a giant perp and a victim who is forty-odd years older than he looks.

"Now, this entire case just got a hell of a lot more weird."

FIVE

INVISIBLE PEOPLE

The big sacks of synthi-caf granules weighed a hundred kilogrammes each, Daniel had told him, reading from the labels on the side. They were light enough that Leonard tended to carry them two at a time, lifting one in each hand as he hauled them from the storeroom on the bottom floor of the warehouse to the grinding machine up on level three. The freight elevator was broken so he had to carry them up the stairs, careful to make sure the sacks didn't catch on the rough edges of the metal banisters and spill open. It was easy work though, so Leonard didn't complain. He never complained, he just did what people told him, whether it was Daniel, Freddie Binns, or any of the people who worked in the warehouse with him. That way, it kept his life simple.

The people working the grinding machine ignored Leonard as he approached. It was always the same. They were mutants, just like he was, but they refused to even look at him. Leonard could never figure out whether it was because they were scared of him, or they thought he was too unimportant to be bothered with. He had been working in the warehouse for nearly a month now, ferrying sacks back and forth from the storeroom to the grinding machine, and never once had the people working it even acknowledged his existence. It was not so much that they didn't talk to him - the noise from the machine was so loud, he couldn't have heard what they were saying if they had tried - they did not nod, or wave, or even smile as he walked by. They kept to their work, acting as though he wasn't there.

As Leonard added the two new sacks to the pile beside the machine, two men began to drag another one of the sacks away. Straining at the effort, they lifted the sack up between them towards the machine's hopper and cut open the top of the bag to tip its contents into the grinder. The blades of the machine seemed to shriek for a moment, the intensity of the noise diminishing as the granules were reduced and smoothed out to a fine powder that was deposited into a waiting sack at the other end of the machine. Leonard had watched the whole process so many times, it no longer held his interest. Instead, he turned away from the machine and began to head back to the stairs.

It's kind of rude, the way they never talk to you, Daniel said as he walked beside him. Because there were other people about, the boy had reverted to whispering things directly into Leonard's mind instead of saying them out loud. *You ever think you could teach them a lesson? You could play a trick on them, maybe pretend you were going to push one of them into the grinder. That would scare them. Imagine the look on their faces!*

It wouldn't be right, Daniel, Leonard told him, shaking his head slowly. Sometimes, it was like his friend didn't understand that the machines in the warehouse were dangerous. *Somebody could get hurt. And, then, I could lose my job*.

I guess, Daniel sighed. *Still, it's not right the way they always ignore you - especially considering how much they need you. I'd like to see what they'd do if you weren't here to help them. I'd like to see them dragging their own bags up from the storeroom. Then, maybe they'd wish they hadn't been so rude*.

It doesn't matter, Daniel, Leonard shook his head, more fiercely. *I need the job for the money. Living in the city isn't like being in the Cursed Earth. You can't just hunt for food, or scavenge for the things you want. You've got to buy them. You heard what Freddie said. That's what civilisation is all about*.

If you say so, Daniel shrugged. Already, the little boy seemed bored with the conversation, his thoughts distracted by something he had spotted elsewhere in the warehouse. As they made their way towards the stairs, Daniel suddenly tugged on the tails of Leonard's coat to get his attention and pointed towards the approaching figure of Leonard's boss, Freddie Binns, as he marched across the warehouse towards them. Freddie did not look happy.

Uh-oh, Daniel said, the words echoing in a sing-song tone inside Leonard's head. *Don't look now, but I think you're in trouble*.

Freddie Binns was a charge-boss, and it was his job to recruit mutant labourers to work in places like the warehouse. Leonard had first met Freddie six months back, soon after he had come over the West Wall into the city from the Cursed Earth. In common with most other things in his life, Leonard had not given any great thought to what he would do once he was inside the city. He had wanted to find his mother, of course. Other than that, he had not planned how he would find food, or a place to live, or even

where he would go after he got over the wall. Unlike most mutants, Leonard had actually been born in Mega-City One, but it made little difference; he had been thrown out of the city when he was three years old, and he knew no more about the city's geography than he did the surface of the moon. Lost and unsure of his bearings, he had wandered the deserted streets of City Bottom for days, eating rats and scavenging from garbage dumps, until he came across a group of fellow mutants camped out in the ruins of an old church.

At first the other mutants had been wary of him, but eventually one of them had explained what they were doing there. Apparently, they had made it over the Wall a week earlier. The snakeheads they had paid to lead them into the city had abandoned them at the church and told them to wait. A man would be coming who would find them all jobs, the snakeheads had said. By the time Leonard found them the mutants were starving, and by offering to hunt and scavenge food for them he persuaded them to let him wait with them. After a couple more days, a van had driven up and Freddie Binns had been behind the wheel. He had told Leonard and the mutants that he had jobs for all them. "This is the Big Meg, friends," Freddie had smiled at them with a mouth full of shining white teeth. "This is the land of opportunity you all heard about. Just make sure you stick with me and you won't go wrong."

Now, Freddie was no longer smiling.

"Lenny?" Freddie said, a scowl on his face as he looked up at Leonard. "Where in hell have you been?"

"Uh... I been in the storeroom, Freddie," Leonard said, pointing a finger towards the stairway. He didn't like it when people called him "Lenny", but right then it didn't seem the best time to mention it. "You know, to fetch the sacks of synthi-caf, like you told me..."

"I don't mean where have you just been, Lenny," the scowl on Freddie's face deepened. "I meant, where were you earlier? An hour ago? I looked around the entire place and I couldn't find you!"

"Oh that..." Flummoxed, Leonard looked to Daniel for inspiration, but the boy had lost interest in what they were saying and had turned to watch the men working on the grinder. Meanwhile, in common with most people, Freddie did not seem to notice Daniel was even there. It was like the little boy was invisible to him. "I... uh... My head started to hurt and I thought some air might help... I went outside for a walk."

"You went out for a walk!" Freddie looked horrified, his voice rising high enough above the din of the grinder that the men there lifted their heads from the machine and glanced at them. "Are you crazy? You're a mutie, Lenny! What if somebody had seen you?"

"Oh, I was careful, Freddie." Leonard lifted his hand to his face. "I know what I look like. I know I can't let anybody see me. I stayed out of sight-"

"That ain't the point, Lenny." For a second, it looked like Freddie was about to start shouting. Then, regaining his temper, he leaned closer and gazed at Leonard like he was explaining something to child. "Listen, the stuff we do here, it's illegal. You understand that, right?"

"Oh sure, Freddie," Leonard nodded his head. "I understand that. Right."

"Good. Now, because of that, we can't go taking any dumb chances, Lenny. It ain't just the Judges we've got to be worried about - though, Grud knows, they're bad enough. There's also the people we work for. We got a sweet gig going here, and they wouldn't be happy if something happened to ruin it. And we don't want to get them angry. You understand me, Lenny? You get any more headaches, it's better if you just take five and wait until it goes away. Don't go walking off on your own. Okay? Are we clear on that?"

"Sure, we're clear, Freddie." Leonard nodded his head more vigorously. "I won't go walking off no more. If I get a headache, I'll just wait until it goes away."

"All right, then," Freddie said, drawing in a deep breath in relief. Abruptly, his face softened. "Listen, the reason I was looking for you is we're ready to make a shipment. Go up to the cutting room and haul the product from there down to the loading bay. Jensen will tell you what needs to come downstairs. You got that, Lenny?"

"I got it, Freddie."

"Good. And no more walks, Lenny. This is the Big Meg. Walk into the wrong place here, and a body could get killed."

Really, when Leonard thought about it, it was strange that Freddie never seemed to notice Daniel. It was the same with most other people as well. Daniel followed Leonard everywhere, hanging around with him and keeping him company, but it was like Leonard was the only one who saw him. Freddie, the other mutants, the warehouse guards: none of them ever spoke to the boy, or even glanced in his direction. Not that the fact of it particularly bothered Leonard. If he had a special friend that only he could

see, then so much the better. At least this way, he didn't have to worry about anybody trying to take Daniel away from him. While the boy travelled beside him, he always had someone to talk with and someone to make his decisions for him. As for Daniel himself, it did not seem to worry the boy in any way that no one seemed able to see him. Far from it, if Daniel even registered the fact at all, he gave no sign of it.

Still, it was strange. Leonard had pondered the whole thing, off and on, ever since he had first met the boy two months ago. That had been in another warehouse: another one of Freddie Binns's jobs. Daniel had simply walked up to Leonard while he was carrying stuff from one place to another, and said "hello". At first, Leonard had figured the boy must be lost to be out alone so late at night. Then, he had figured the boy must be blind, to walk up to someone as ugly as Leonard without running and screaming when he saw what he looked like. Finally, he had figured the boy must be as lonely as he was. Why else come up to him at all? It had suited Leonard, though, to talk to the boy. The fact of it was, he and Daniel had both been equally as lonely.

It wasn't easy being a mutant in Mega-City One. By law, mutants were banned from the city. If the Judges found them, they rounded them up and sent them back outside to the wastelands of the Cursed Earth. The Judges' eyes were everywhere: they had spy cameras, and flying surveillance robots. Mutants like Leonard had to stay out of sight, only coming out at night, always wary in case some citizen saw them and reported them to the Judges. Yet, no matter what the laws said, Leonard knew there were plenty of mutants inside Mega-City One. They hid out in City Bottom, or in the ruined Undercity deep beneath the earth. They worked in illegal warehouses and factories for charge-bosses like Freddie Binns. They were the city's invisible people. No one wanted to admit they existed, but they live in the city all the same.

Invisible people. The more Leonard thought about it, the more he realised that maybe him and Daniel were not so different.

The cutting room was up on level four. One entire wall at the front of the room took the form of a transparent plasteen screen designed to allow the guards outside to keep watch on the cutters while they worked. Inside the room, a dozen cutters sat around a long table. They were naked. Using scales and measures, they weighed out minute portions of powdered coffee,

mixing them with larger portions of synthi-caf and synthetic gravy browning, before pouring the resulting mixture into small plasteen envelopes. The first time Leonard had seen the cutting room he had wondered what was going on, but Freddie had explained it all to him.

Real coffee was illegal in Mega-City One, Freddie had told him. "The damn Judges have banned it, the same way they've banned almost everything else," Freddie had said. "But, of course, that doesn't stop people from wanting it. That's what we do here, Lenny. We give people what they want. We smuggle in real coffee, cut it with cheaper stuff to keep up the profit, then ship it out all over the city. There's a whole lot of caffeine junkies in the Big Meg, Lenny. And, you wouldn't believe what they pay for a taste of mellow roasted."

The cutters worked in the nude to make it harder for them to steal the coffee, Freddie had explained. One time, the guards had caught one of the mutant cutters trying to smuggle a half-kilo of real Colombian in a skin-pouch on his belly. They had beaten the mutant to death, hanging him up by his arms and hitting him with metal pipes while they made the warehouse's other workers watch. "The price of doing business in the Big Meg," Freddie had called it.

Now, as Leonard approached the cutting room, a hard-faced man peeled away from the group of guards milling around outside and strode towards him.

"Freddie send you up?" Jensen asked. He looked Leonard up and down for a moment, his mouth pursed in a frown as though he didn't like what he saw. "The load is over there." He used the sawn-off stump gun in his hands to gesture towards a stack of crates outside the cutting room. "We already counted the baggies inside 'em. The count comes up short at the other end, it'll be you that pays for it." He tapped his gun menacingly on one of the crates. "You understand that, mutie?"

"I understand," Leonard said.

He lifted one of the crates, feeling the contents settle as the thousands of plasteen envelopes inside it shifted with the sudden movement. While Jensen still glowered at him, he began to walk the crate towards the stairs.

He shouldn't talk to people that way, Daniel said from beside him. *You see the way he kept showing off the gun? It was like he was threatening you, Leonard*.

He was threatening me, Leonard told the boy. *That's his job, Daniel. He's my boss, same as Freddie is. And, in the city, it's Okay if your boss threatens you. That's how it works*.

It felt weird for him to be the one explaining things to Daniel, but at times it was as though the little boy didn't really understand the way the world worked at all. Leonard understood it, though. Thanks to how he looked, people assumed he was stupid and thought they could talk to him any way they wanted. What was more, there was nothing he could do about it. Sure, if he made up his mind to do it, he could have taken Jensen's gun off him and wrapped it around the man's throat. But then, where would he be? He would lose his job, and the place where he lived. He would have to go back to scavenging for rats and garbage on City Bottom. Mega-City One wasn't like the Cursed Earth: you couldn't kill people just because you didn't like them. Living in the city meant sometimes you had to put up with people being mean, or unkind, or harsh. It was like Freddie had told him. It was the price of doing business.

Still, it's not right, Daniel said. *He shouldn't be so mean and nasty, Leonard. He's like the bad men. The men who hurt me. And bad men should be punished*.

Listening closely, Leonard realised a new tone had entered the boy's voice inside his head. It was a restless, uneasy sound that sat strangely with the high-pitched childish lilt of Daniel's voice. It was a sound Leonard knew of old, same as he knew what its coming meant. It had been only a few hours since they had killed the man in the office on the two-hundredth floor, but already Daniel's mind was turning once more to thoughts of vengeance. Soon, he would remind Leonard of the promise he had made. Soon, he would send Leonard out on another errand halfway across the city.

Soon, they would kill again.

SIX

DIFFERENCES OF OPINION

"Let me see if I'm hearing this right." Tolsen's expression was aghast, his words uttered in a rising tone of disbelief. "You're saying the killer was a child?"

"No," Anderson shook her head. "I'm only telling you what the victim saw. James Nales saw his killer's face, and it belonged to a little boy about seven or eight years old."

"But that's impossible," Tolsen said. He shrugged in annoyance. "Look, I'm not trying to tell you your business. This is your investigation, Anderson. You're the Psi-Judge here, not me. But what you've just said contradicts every piece of physical evidence we've managed to collect. The killer was over two metres tall, for Grud's sake! And he strangled the victim with his bare hands. There's no way a child could do that."

They were in the outer office; Anderson and Tolsen thrashing out the results of the psi-scan between them while Lang stood a short distance away watching them in silence. The rookie Psi-Judge had not said a word since Anderson had dropped her bombshell, but from the look on her face the words "I told you so" were currently uppermost in her thoughts.

"I'll admit it sounds crazy," Anderson said to Tolsen. "But you're not listening to what I'm saying. I'm just telling you what I saw in the psi-scan. As far as James Nales was concerned, his killer was a little boy. That doesn't mean he actually was a little boy. It simply means that's what Nales believed him to be. He could have been wrong, or mistaken - I don't know. But that's exactly what he saw."

"But of course it's wrong," Tolsen snorted loudly in growing anger. "What about the handholds in the elevator shaft and the broken vertebrae? There's no way a child could have that kind of strength. And what about the differences in height between a child and an adult? Nales stood at one-metre-drokking-eighty. Are you telling me the kid stood on a chair to be able to reach his throat?"

"No, I'm not saying anything of the kind." Biting her lip, Anderson tried to control her own temper. "Again, all I'm saying is that James Nales believed his killer was a child. Maybe he was hallucinating. Maybe he was crazy. Maybe the killer was using a portable holo-emitter to disguise

himself. Whatever the case, we can't just dismiss the results of the scan out of hand. Sure, we take it with a pinch of salt. But, right now, Nales's lingering memories are the only thing we have that even comes close to an eyewitness account of the crime."

"Actually, they're not the only thing," Lang spoke at last, stepping forward to interrupt their conversation. Lang's mouth was set in a tight, stony line: Anderson got the impression her fellow Psi-Judge regarded both her and Tolsen with equal disdain. "We've got another witness. If not quite an eyewitness, then at least he's the next best thing." She looked at Anderson. "That's what I was doing when you arrived on the scene - looking for evidence to support the results of my psi-scan." Her expression grew darker. "Anyway, like I say, I found a witness. And I think you'll both be interested in what he has to say."

A middle-aged man in a grubby set of overalls stood waiting outside in the hallway. Lang led the others down the hall and nodded towards him.

"This is Dwayne Hemmings. He works for the company who handle the cleaning contract at Franz Kafka. He's the one who called in the murder." She turned to face the man. "Tell the other Judges what you told me, Dwayne."

"Uh, well actually, we use robots to do the cleaning," Hemmings said. Uncomfortable at finding himself on the receiving end of an interrogation by three Judges, his fingers fidgeted nervously at the sleeve of his overalls. "It's my job to supervise them, and contact the maintenance team if any of the robots go on the fritz. That's what I was doing up here on the two-hundredth. Cleaning Unit Twelve had a malfunction and started trying to apply floor varnish to the carpets. Made a hell of a mess. I've been telling Maintenance for two weeks now that Twelve's been acting hinky, but they don't lis-"

"The murder, Dwayne," Lang prompted him, impatiently. "Tell them what you heard."

"Oh, yeah. Well, I was in the office over there." He pointed two doors down the hallway. "I'd just removed Twelve's control panel and I was trying to get its systems to reboot, when I heard what sounded like voices. At first, I didn't think too much of it - I mean, people work late in these offices all the time. Then, I heard a kid's voice talking and I thought that was kind of strange. You know, seeing as it was so late and all."

"You heard a child's voice?" Anderson asked him. "You're sure of that?"

"Oh sure," Hemmings nodded. "A little boy, it sounded like. I mean, I got a couple of kids myself. Well, they're really juves now, I suppose, seeing as they're both in their teens. But, anyway, I know what a kid sounds like. And one of them was definitely a little boy's voice. I'm certain of it."

"One of them? There was more than one voice?"

"Yeah. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but there was two of them all right. One was the kid's voice, like I said. The other was deeper. A man's voice. A big guy, from the sound of it. Anyway, after a while, the talking stopped. Then, later, after I'd finished with Twelve, I came out into the hallway and saw the door to the office there was open. I went over to see if anybody was inside so I could ask 'em whether they minded me sending a robot in to do the cleaning. That's when I saw him. The dead guy, I mean." He shuddered at the memory. "He was lying there, with them words carved into his chest and his tongue all swollen and purple. Grud, I tell you, it almost made me hurl. 'Course, when I saw that, I got out of there as quick as possible. That's when I went to one of the other offices and used the vid-phone to call the Judges."

"Would you recognise the voices if you heard them again?" Anderson asked.

"I guess. Maybe. I dunno." Hemmings shrugged. "I mean, they were just voices after all. It ain't like I got a... watjamacallit... a phonographic memory or nothing. I just watch robots clean floors for a living."

"Anything else?" Lang said, lifting an eyebrow to Anderson and Tolsen. Seeing them shake their heads, she turned back to Hemmings. "All right, Dwayne. Thank you. You've been a great help to our investigation."

"You mean I can go now?" Hemmings breathed an almost audible sigh of relief.

"I've got your details," Lang said. "We'll contact you if we need to talk again."

As Hemmings turned to walk away, the Judges were silent for a moment. Then, once the man was out of earshot, Tolsen spoke.

"Phonographic memory? You ask me the guy has raw munce where his brains ought to be."

"True," Lang's face wore a subtle smile of vindication. "But that doesn't alter the fact we now have independent corroboration a child was up here."

She paused, the smile growing slightly wider. "So, it looks like the results of the psi-scan weren't so off-beam after all."

"All right, it seems we're now on the hunt for two perps," Anderson said. "A boy and a giant. Given the fact the witness described them as talking amongst themselves, it doesn't seem likely they both turned up here at the same time by accident. For now, I'd say our best bet is to assume they came to the scene together and committed the crime in tandem. As to the results of the psi-scan, maybe we can see an explanation now. Nales was being strangled, his brain cells dying through lack of oxygen. Maybe that scrambled his memories somehow, and he put the boy's face on the giant's body."

It was later, and Tolsen had left to supervise the removal of the body from the office while Anderson attempted to discuss the case with Lang in the hallway. It was hard going. After her brief show of emotion when she had unveiled Hemmings's testimony, Lang had retreated into her shell. She stood facing Anderson with her arms crossed in front of her, her features cast in a serious and unflinching expression that even a street Judge might have found reason to envy. If Lang had anything to add to Anderson's verbal theorising, she gave no sign of it.

"A boy and a giant," Anderson shook her head with a sigh. "Grud, the whole thing sounds like some kind of kid's fairytale gone bad. I mean, they climb a two-hundred storey tower to kill an old man who looks to be in his thirties. Then, they escape again, with no one any the wiser as to who they were or why they came here. The way this case is going, I wouldn't be surprised if before much longer we find ourselves knee-deep in dwarf miners, magic beanstalks, and golden egg-laying geese."

In reply, Lang said nothing. Her lips pursed in a sullen line, she gazed coolly at Anderson and made no comment.

"Okay, so I can see you're not big with the on-the-job witticisms," Anderson said to her. "But remember, we're supposed to be working this case together. If you've got any ideas or theories, now's the time to let them out."

"The way I understand it, we're not working anything together," Lang said. Her expression put Anderson in a mind of a sulky teenager. "You ask me, I was doing fine on this one on my own. But Psi Division saw it

differently. They told me you were taking over, and I'd be answering to you from now on."

"That's what you were told, huh?" Anderson said. She paused, weighing her words carefully. "Listen, Lang, maybe it's better if we clear the air now before we continue. I realise the situation is hardly ideal..."

"That's putting it mildly," the other Psi-Judge spat back, a well of sudden emotion breaching the dam walls of her reserve in a flood of angry words. "You think I don't know what's going on? You think I don't realise why they sent you? They've decided I'm not up to the job and they've sent you to be the axeman. This is my last case, isn't it? After we catch the perps, you'll write up a report and say I'm not carrying my weight. And we both know what happens then, don't we? I get drummed out of Psi Division. But it's not like getting thrown out of Street Division, is it? If you don't make the grade as a Psi-Judge, they don't turn you back into a civilian. Not when you've got psychic powers. Once this case is closed and you've done your dirty work, I'll be put in the psi-cubes like all the other psychics they say are too dangerous to be allowed to walk the streets. And why? Just because I butted heads with a street Judge about the results of a psi-scan that were drokking right to begin with!"

Lang's voice had steadily risen in the course of her diatribe. Now, it broke. Tears began to streak down her face. Embarrassed, she turned away from Anderson and wiped her eyes.

Long moments passed in uncomfortable silence. Finally, Anderson extended a hand to her colleague's shoulder and tried to console her.

"Listen to me, Lang. You're upset. I understand that. No one likes to be second-guessed in the field, especially when it turns out they were right all along. But I didn't come here to play executioner. My only brief is to work the case." Hating herself for it, Anderson lied. "Nobody said you weren't up to the job. I was assigned to the investigation because you're a rookie, and this case shows every early sign of becoming a monster. We have a giant, a child murderer, a thirty-eight year-old victim whose true age is closer to eighty, conflicting sets of physical and psychic evidence. And that's not counting the message carved into the victim's chest. 'Your sins will find you out'. Grud knows what that means. The whole thing has 'serial killer case' written all over it. If we don't catch the killer - or killers - quickly, there's going to be more victims. I'm sure of it. And, believe me, when you're working a serial case, you take every bit of extra help that's going - even if

it means having to swallow another Judge being assigned to work the case with you. I'm not here to grab control of your investigation, Lang. That's not my style. We've got a murder to solve - between the two of us. Let's forget everything that's gone on already, and work this case together. Now, if you want to take a minute to gather your thoughts, I can-"

"I'm fine." Shrugging away Anderson's hand, Lang turned to face her once more. Her tears had dried, and in place of her earlier passions she wore an expression of glacial composure. "You'll have to forgive my outburst. I was tired and it's been a long night, that's all. I'm fully capable of doing my duties. You said it yourself: we've a murder to solve. Let's get to work."

"Okay, then." Wrong-footed by the unexpected change in Lang's demeanour, for a second Anderson found she was uncertain how best to proceed. "So, nothing about this crime suggests the choice of victim was random. You don't climb ten storeys inside an elevator shaft to kill someone without having a reason to want them dead. Probably our best way forward is to concentrate on the background of James Nales and see whether we can find a moti-"

"Anderson! Lang!" Abruptly, Tolsen emerged from inside the office and jogged towards them in a state of euphoria. "I just heard back from MAC. You're not going to believe it!"

"What have got for us?" Anderson said.

"Two things," Tolsen seemed breathless with excitement. "First off, I played a hunch. The Justice Department maintains a database of the criminal aliases of perps who have yet to be identified. Sometimes, an informant will tell a Judge that 'Perp X' was responsible for a given crime - but they only know 'Perp X' by a street name or alias. Without a real name to help track the perp down, often the Judge working the case has to chalk it off as an unsolved. But the aliases themselves are recorded, so I asked MAC to check the name 'James Nales' against the file and see what it could come up with. MAC found a hit. Over the last six months, three different perps arrested on charges ranging from Organ Legging to Possession Of Controlled Substances With Intent To Distribute have admitted under interrogation that they worked for someone with the street name 'Jimmy Nayles'. 'Nayles' spelt N-A-Y-L-E-S, like the things you hit with a hammer. In each case, the name turned out to be a dead end. It was like Jimmy Nayles was a ghost: the perps in question had never met him, and couldn't

say what his real name was or what he looked like. He was a complete mystery man, so his name went into the alias file and that was that."

"And you think our victim James Nales may be this mystery mobster Jimmy Nayles?" Anderson asked him. "I know we've already established he doesn't seem the typical businessman, but are you sure you're not reaching here?"

"I admit it sounds like a stretch," Tolsen smiled in satisfaction. "Except, I've received other evidence that supports it. You remember I said I sent Nales's DNA to MAC? To compare it against the Justice Department's genetic database? I just got the results back. You know, there's a lot of ways a perp can try to conceal his identity. He can change his face, use nanosurgery to alter his fingerprints, even undergo a retinal transplant. But you can't beat DNA. MAC found a match in the database that confirms James Nales wasn't who he claimed to be. As who he really was..."

Tolsen paused for effect, the smile on his face broadening to such an extent that Anderson was immediately put to mind of a cat having been at the synthi-cream.

"Tell me," Tolsen said, "has either of you ever heard of a perp named Konrad Gruschenko?"

SEVEN

THE SECRETS OF JIMMY NAYLES

Dead of night, and the city is quiet. The choking logjams and gridlock of traffic by day have eased, giving way to gentle streams. The bars and nightspots are closed, or mostly empty. The pedways are all but deserted. In housing blocks and hotels, in con-apts and crockblocks, in displaced person camps and the cardboard cities of the homeless, millions of citizens lie slumbering in their beds. For the Judges out on patrol, working the end of the graveyard shift, the calls from Control are becoming less frequent. Dawn is still two hours away, but the worst of the night-time peak in the crime rate has passed. The city is sleeping. Its lights have dimmed. Its pulse slows and becomes torpid.

Yet still, even in this time of peace, there is room for unease among those who refuse to be ruled by Law.

"Jimmy Nayles is dead."

It begins with a whisper. A message spoken and passed by word-of-mouth in hushed tones of almost-reverence. It begins with four words, spread like wildfire across shadowed streets by any who have reason to fear them. The words are not broadcast on the news. They do not make it into the pages of the news-zines, or onto the Megaweb. They are not discussed, dissected, or commentated upon by learned voices. The Judges do not hear them; they are not meant for the ears of those who enforce the regime of Justice. The message follows its own pathway through the city's labyrinth. It is sent and received in shuggy halls and illegal coffee-houses, passed on through the ranks of sugar dealers, stookie glanders, slabwalkers, body sharkers, bust-out artists, and the practitioners of a dozen other illicit professions. Its effect is like a stone striking the clear waters of a lake. Its ripples expand and push outwards, spurring action. Unnoticed by the Judges, a shudder moves through the underworld.

At the sound of four words, while the rest of the city sleeps unawares, the course of thousands of lives are abruptly altered. There is fear and panic. Decisions are made. Plans are changed.

Four words. To those that hear them and know their meaning, they hiss like a burning fuse. Four words, bringing uncertainty and the threat of

discovery in their wake. Four words, like portents of danger. In the underworld, a silent storm gathers and is given flight.

Four words.

"Jimmy Nayles is dead."

For Peter Arkady, the news came at 4.07. Jarred from sleep by a persistent ringing sound, he awoke and turned on his bedside lamp. Then, reaching out to retrieve a palm-sized audio-only communicator from the nightstand next to his bed, he flipped it open and pressed it to his ear.

"Wait a moment," he said, answering the call.

He turned in his bed to look at the young woman lying naked and half-asleep beside him.

"Go make some coffee," he told her.

"Coffee?" Her eyelids fluttered in bleary petulance. "It's the middle of the night..."

"Make some coffee," he repeated the order. The tone of his voice did not invite dissent. "Now. And close the bedroom door behind you."

Chastened, the woman grabbed a flimsy robe to cover herself and scurried away. Waiting until she had left the room, Arkady turned back to the communicator, checking the encryption software was engaged before he resumed his conversation.

"This is Number Two," he said, switching from English to his native Russian. "I am alone now. Speak."

"This is Three here, Two," the voice answered on the other end of the line. "I have sad news. Number One is no longer with us."

"Arrested?"

"No. Killed. Strangled, in fact. It could be the work of our competitors, but it seems unlikely. I am told the manner of the killing was most... unprofessional."

"Hnn. You think it resulted from a personal matter?" Arkady asked.

"It could be," the other replied. "We all have our entanglements in that regard. Then again, it could have been random, or even a hit disguised to look like the work of a maniac. Either way, it will likely result in unwanted attention. I am told the Judges are already at his office. Number One was a careful man, but who knows what they might find there. I suggest we follow protocol in his matter."

"Agreed." Arkady checked the display of the clock on his nightstand. "Initiate Evasion Pattern Beta. I want a car ready to pick me up at Extraction Point Three in exactly one hour. Until then, you know what to do."

Terminating the call, Arkady hurried to his wardrobe and quickly dressed. Moving to an ornate mirror mounted on the wall of the en-suite bathroom, he activated a hidden catch and pulled the mirror to one side to reveal the wall safe concealed beneath it. Typing his combination into the keypad, he opened the safe. Inside, a briefcase sat waiting alongside his electronic passport, personal comp-unit and other effects. Removing the briefcase, he checked its contents: laspistol, gauss grenade, the key to a rented storage locker, twenty thousand credits in digital chits and cash, three communicator SIM cards, plus driver's licence and a citizen ID in the name of an alternate identity. Completing a mental inventory, Arkady prised open the back of his communicator and replaced the SIM card inside it with one of the new cards from the briefcase. Next, tossing the used SIM into the safe, he took the gauss grenade, primed it, then placed the grenade in the safe and closed the door behind it. After a few seconds a muffled pop came from the other side of the door as the grenade detonated, unleashing a burst of electromagnetic radiation powerful enough to erase the electronic memory of everything inside it. Satisfied, Arkady picked up his briefcase and made ready to leave the apartment.

"Mr Gregory?"

The woman was sitting in an armchair with her legs curled under her, waiting for him as he stepped out into the living room. She had turned the Tri-D player on, and he saw two steaming cups of coffee on the low table in front of the sofa.

"Are you going out?" She looked up at him through curled lashes, her fingers playing unconsciously at the hem of her robe. "Already? I mean, you paid for the whole night."

"I'll be back soon," he lied to her. "Something came up at work and I have to go in to the office. It won't take long. In the meantime, make yourself at home."

Briefcase in hand, Arkady moved smoothly from the living room to the door of his apartment. As he opened the door, he heard the woman's voice behind him.

"Mr Gregory? What about if there's another call? Should I answer it, or just let the machine take it?"

"I wouldn't worry," he said, smiling gently at her over his shoulder. "There won't be any more calls."

Still smiling, Arkady stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind him. Then, without so much as a backwards glance, he left the girl, the apartment, and his old life behind, never to return.

"Jimmy Nayles is dead."

In a flurry of vid-phone calls, the message spreads. Contingencies are activated. Pre-existing plans are put into practice.

In gambling dens, drug labs, stash houses, number drops and brothels, the reaction is the same. In a dozen sectors across the city, a hundred illegal enterprises abruptly shut up shop. Records are burnt. Deliveries are cancelled. Merchandise is re-routed. Customers are turned away.

In the brief space of a few hours entire criminal operations are packed up and ready to go, to be moved lock, stock and barrel to new premises. Tomorrow, when the dust clears, things will get back to normal. Safe in new locations, these same operations will unlock their doors once more and proclaim they are open for business. But, for tonight, everything is different. Tonight, the dictates of security mean precautions must be taken.

Tonight, Jimmy Nayles is dead.

For Leonard, the news came as he was transferring a crate to the cargo van parked in the loading bay. Hearing the sounds of commotion, he paused in his work and turned to see a group of cutters running naked down the stairway. Jensen and the other guards were with them, and as Leonard watched he realised the cutters and their guards were carrying big bags of uncut coffee, as well as all the weighing and measuring equipment from inside the cutting room.

"Hey, Lenny!" As Leonard stood gazing in confusion at the scene before him, Freddie Binns suddenly ran up beside him, his face red and breathless. "Get those crates loaded on the van quick! We got to get moving!"

"Okay, Freddie," Leonard said. He looked again at the stairway. "Is something wrong? How come everybody's running?"

"Wrong?" Freddie looked at him as though he was stupid. "Didn't nobody tell you? Jimmy Nayles is dead, Lenny!"

"Jimmy Nayles?" A thought played dimly at the edges of Leonard's memory. The name sounded familiar, like he had heard it from somewhere before. "I think I know the name..."

Abruptly, Leonard noticed that Daniel was waving at him to attract his attention. The boy had been sitting on a crate, minding his own business, but now he put his finger to his lips to signal Leonard should stay quiet.

"Of course you know it, Lenny," Freddie sighed in exasperation. "You've been working here a month, you must have heard it from somebody. Jimmy Nayles is the top man. The big boss. He runs this whole operation. Now he's dead, we've got to move to new digs before the Judges get wise." He clapped his hands urgently. "C'mon, Lenny. Chop-chop! We ain't got time for talking! We got to get our asses in gear!"

Turning to one of the crates, Freddie started to drag it himself as the cutters and the guards arrived at the loading bay to begin packing their burdens pell-mell into the back of the van. Stooping to help Freddie with the crate, it suddenly occurred to Leonard exactly where he had heard the name Jimmy Nayles - or James Nales, at least - before. It was strange when he thought of it, but when he had first seen Mega-City One it had seemed to him it had to be the biggest place in the world.

Now, big city or not, it was beginning to look like the world was a lot smaller than he had thought.

By the time the hoverlimo arrived in the parking garage beneath the Bob Woodward Hotel and Buy-Mart, Peter Arkady was already waiting. Stepping from the shadows, he opened one of the limo's rear doors and sat inside the passenger compartment.

"Well?" he asked the driver as they pulled away. "What is our progress?"

"The evasion is at seventy-five per cent completion, Mr Gregory," the driver replied. Through the open partition between them, Arkady saw the man raise his eyes to look at him in the rear-view mirror. "I am told it should reach ninety per cent within the next hour. Even if the Judges are on to us, we will have disappeared before they can act. At most, all they will find waiting for them are low-level stragglers and empty premises."

"Good. But my name is not Gregory any more. It is..." Finding his memory had failed him, Arkady checked the citizen ID in his briefcase. "Whittaker. I am Arthur Whittaker. Hmpff. I shall have to remember to have a word with Brotsky about these names. He could have at least have given

me something that sounds less like an insurance salesman. But then, anonymity is the point of the exercise, I suppose. What about you, Vasseivich? What is your name now?"

"Dunn," the driver replied. "I am Roy Dunn."

"Roy? Really? Still, it could have been worse. With his febrile imagination, our illustrious document-maker might have called you Ralph something. Or Billy-Bob, or Lester, or Mitch. Hnn. Americans." He sucked air between his teeth. "Is there any better proof of what idiots they are, than the fact they give their children such stupid names?"

Stifling a yawn, Arkady felt tiredness creep over him. He had been busy since he had been roused from his bed. In the wake of the report of his superior's untimely demise, he had visited his own office and activated a pre-installed virus inside his business computer designed to purge all files, before walking to the rendezvous point to be picked up by the limo. Gazing out through the tinted Plexiglas of the passenger window as the limo pulled out of the garage and took to the air, he experienced a sudden annoyance at the thought of the setback his organisation had suffered tonight. Inevitably, as they moved their enterprises to new locations and attempted to cover their tracks, there would be financial losses in the shape of abandoned merchandise and materials. Still, in the end, it was better to keep some of the pie than lose it all. Tonight, they might well lose millions of credits, but had they left their operations exposed and the Judges had found them, then the losses could have run into the billions.

As the limo rose up through the airways and Arkady found himself looking out over the city, a new thought occurred to him. In the rush and hurry of leaving his apartment, the full implications of news he had received had swept over his head. Now, he realised, with the death of its leader, he had moved up the Organisation's hierarchy. The succession was clear. He was now the top man. He allowed himself to savour a quiet moment of elation. He was Number One. As the words of the storybooks had it, the king was dead.

Long live the king.

"Mr Whittaker?" Abruptly, the sound of the driver's voice intruded into his thoughts. "I was asked to remind you there is a question that awaits your most urgent consideration. I am talking about Gruschenko's killers. There will need to be retaliation."

"Agreed," Arkady said. "Put the word out through the usual channels that we will pay a hundred thousand credits to whoever can lead us to them." He looked at his watch. "Now, I need to make a call."

Pressing a button on the armrest of his chair to seal the partition, Arkady leaned forward to open the compartment containing the limo's vid-phone. Typing a number in from memory, he activated the scrambler encryption, then waited for the call to go through.

"Prendergast here." A man's face appeared on-screen as the call was answered. Arkady saw the man's hand appear briefly as he touched something to the side of his screen. "The line is secure. So, Mr Arkady? To what do we owe this honour?"

EIGHT

DEAD BEAR, THE TEA PARTY AND LAZARUS

"Konrad Gruschenko," said Watch Commander Hunter as he stood at the lectern addressing the assembled ranks of Judges seated in the Sector House 45 briefing room. "No doubt some of you are already familiar with the name. I understand the Judge-Tutors at the Academy still occasionally make use of him as a case study in their classes."

Lifting a small remote control device from the lectern, Hunter pointed it at the blank briefing screen behind him. A picture appeared: a grainy 2-D photo of a burly man in his fifties, his image caught on surveillance-cam as he stepped from a limousine flanked by a phalanx of bodyguards.

"This is what Gruschenko looked like in 2097," Hunter continued. "He first came to Justice Department attention in the late 2090s, as the leader of an immigrant crime group of ex-Sov Bloc citizens running a stookie glanding operation in Sector 83. They called themselves 'The Organizatsiya' - that's The Organisation, for those of you that don't speak Sov. Further investigation revealed that stookie glanding was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to their activities. Gruschenko and his cronies had their fingers in about every racket you could think of: drug smuggling, murder-for-hire, counterfeiting, credit and insurance fraud, illegal gambling, arms dealing, organ legging, loan sharking - you name it. Street Division took them down in a series of raids in 2098. There were casualties. A lot of the Sovs resisted arrest, including Gruschenko himself."

He pressed the remote again, the image on-screen changing to a close-up of a burnt and blackened human hand lying severed amid a pile of debris.

"When the tac-team kicked in the door, Gruschenko opened fire on them with a lazooka. The lazooka malfunctioned, resulting in an explosion that killed Gruschenko and two of the Judges. Of course, after that, there wasn't much left to identify the bodies. Fingerprints and DNA from a severed hand found among the rubble matched Gruschenko's, so it was assumed he was dead. Case closed. At least, that was the way it looked until tonight."

The image on the screen changed once more, revealing a close-up of the body of James Nales lying dead in his office.

"A few hours ago, Psi-Judges Anderson and Lang were called to investigate a homicide at the Franz Kafka Office-Plex," Hunter said,

nodding to the two Psi-Judges sitting among the front row of Judges. "The victim's name was James Nales." He turned to indicate the screen behind him. "As you can see, Nales appears to be in his late thirties. In the course of medical examination, however, it became apparent the victim had undergone several rejuve jobs and was actually in his eighties. A routine DNA scan confirmed his identity: James Nales was Konrad Gruschenko. It looks like Gruschenko faked his death in 2098, and continued his criminal activities under a new ID."

Momentarily, the Watch Commander was silent as a ripple of whispered conversation ran around the room. Then, he raised his hand for silence.

"Given the fact 'James Nales' was only ten years old in 2098, there's every chance this wasn't the first fake ID that Gruschenko used. The Organised Crime Unit is currently working under the theory that he must have changed identity and moved his rackets every few years - that's how he escaped detection for so long. Presumably, he figured he could stay one step ahead of us forever. Fortuitously though, his death has now given us all the information we need to shut down his entire operation."

Again, the image changed. The grisly close-up of Nales/Gruschenko disappeared, replaced by a map of the Sector in which a dozen different locations had been highlighted.

"Forensic analysis of the encrypted records on Gruschenko's office computer has identified a number of locations where we believe illegal activity may be taking place. Accordingly, we will be mounting a number of simultaneous raids on these locations at dawn. These raids will be timed to coincide with similar raids on other suspected Organizatsiya fronts across three different sectors. The timing is crucial: by going in simultaneously we increase our chances of catching Gruschenko's confederates red-handed before they can destroy any evidence. With any luck, we should be able to roll up the whole network in one fell swoop, in the process dealing a crippling blow to organised crime in this city. Any questions?"

He paused, looking out at the faces of the Judges before him.

"No? Good. Once this briefing is over, you will all report to your assigned tac-teams where you will each be given details by your supervisors of your specific duties during the raids. In order to maintain operational security, codewords will be used in all future briefings, as well as in Control dispatches and in radio communications between tac-team members. Gruschenko will be referred to as 'Dead Bear'; the Organizatsiya will be

called 'The Tea Party'; while the operation itself has been codenamed 'Lazarus'. I repeat: Dead Bear, The Tea Party and Lazarus. Remember those words and use them. This operation is too important to be compromised by some idiot flapping his lips. If I hear anybody breaching security by using the real names, they'll find themselves on a charge."

"Finally, before you go, a note of caution." Switching off the briefing screen and laying down the remote, Hunter's face adopted a sombre cast. "Be aware that some of the perps are likely to be ex-Sov Bloc citizens like Gruschenko. In which case, we're talking about career criminals with extensive experience of the Sov Bloc justice system; which, I'm sure I don't have to tell you, is a hell of a lot harsher than our own. That means they don't scare easily. In all likelihood, therefore, we can expect them to resist arrest. I want it clear: I'm not telling anyone here to shoot first and ask questions later. But, that said, be ready to go in hard, fast and heavy. Remember, when you're taking down a perp, it's not just your own life that's on the line, but also the lives of your fellow Judges. You know the drill. Stay sharp. Stay alert. But, most of all, stay alive."

Hunter fell silent once more, taking a long look at the Judges before him as he gave time for his words to sink in.

"All right," he said at last. "You all know what's expected of you. There's crime out there. Let's get to work."

As the Watch Commander signalled an end to the briefing, the Judges in the room rose and began to separate off into individual tac-teams to be sub-briefed by their supervisors. Watching them as she remained seated in the front row of chairs with Lang beside her, Anderson found herself feeling a sense of vague unease at the course of recent developments.

Somehow, the case she had been assigned to a few short hours ago had mutated from an initially baffling homicide into a complex organised crime case involving four different sectors and seven separate divisions. In the room around her there were street Judges, Med-Judges, Teks, members of the Public Surveillance Unit and Accounts Division; never mind Psi Division operatives in the shape of Lang and Anderson herself. There was even a member of the Special Judicial Squad, present as an uninvited observer, sitting at the back of the room. It was not that Anderson was too proud to accept help: the discovery of the victim's secret life had caused the case to spiral off into so many different avenues of investigation that she realised it was beyond her powers to deal with them all. In part, her unease

came from an innate distrust of the workings of bureaucracy. The Justice Department was remarkably efficient for an organisation of its size, but she was all too aware of the danger that the murder of Konrad Gruschenko, AKA James Nales, might slip through the cracks in the system as the focus of the investigation shifted from the victim to his criminal empire.

There was a larger problem, however; albeit one that was altogether more practical in nature. In Anderson's experience, there was more than a grain of truth in the old adage about too many cooks spoiling the synthi-broth. Having so many other Judges wandering through the case in their size elevens would be as likely to be a hindrance to her investigation as it would a help.

It must be an age thing, she thought abruptly. I'm starting to think like a grumpy old woman, scared the Tri-D repairman is going to leave muddy footprints all over her carpets. Then again, maybe it's true what they say about Psi-Judges: we don't play well with others.

"Looks like they're gearing up for World War Four," Lang said from beside her, indicating a group of Judges armed with breach shields, stumm gas grenades, and Widowmaker spit gun/stump gun combinations. "The Watch Commander wasn't lying when he talked about going in hard and heavy."

"Believe me, it's for the best," Anderson commented. "Hunter was right when he talked about how harsh the Sov justice system is. Ex-Sov criminals tend to hate Judges with a passion - and they aren't too bothered when it comes to distinguishing between Mega-City Judges and our Sov counterparts. Plus, they tend to be heavily armed, which only makes matters worse. Probably at least half of these dawn raids will turn into firefights."

"In that case, shouldn't we be arming up ourselves?" Lang asked. "We should at least get helmets and respirators, if there's going to be stumm gas flying about."

"We won't need them," Anderson replied. "We're not going out on the raids. Remember, our role in all this is to find out who killed Konrad Gruschenko - we can leave it to the others to dismantle his criminal operations. Once the raids have been completed and they start bringing prisoners back to the Sector House, we can telepathically interrogate the hard cases - the ones who won't crack under other methods. Then, maybe, we'll be able to get a lead on Gruschenko's killer."

"And in the meantime?" Lang seemed impatient, as though having expected to be part of the raids she now found herself with an excess of energy in need of channelling. "It's going to take at least an hour before they start bringing the first of the perps in. What do we do until then?"

"We do the grunt work," Anderson said. "We put calls into MAC and get it to trawl through the records to see if there are other cases that match our killer's MO. We ask PSU to pull the surveillance logs for Franz Kafka and find out whether our killers cased the building in the weeks before the crime. We get the Teks analysing Gruschenko's computer to check whether there's anything in his files to suggest who his enemies might have been. Then, we follow up on any leads that arise. It's old-fashioned police procedure, like they did in the day before somebody decided to recruit psychics like us to Justice Department. Grud, who knows, maybe by the time this investigation finishes we'll have more sympathy for street Judges, Teks, and all the others who have to crack cases without having psychic powers to guide them."

She smiled at Lang, trying to put the other woman at her ease, only to see the smile met with a glacial look. Despite Anderson's best efforts to break the ice between them, Lang had refused to warm to her.

"If that's the way you want to play it, I'll follow your lead," Lang said. "Though, you ask me, we've got the powers - we should use them."

"To do what exactly?" Anderson spread her hands, turning up her palms in a friendly and expansive gesture, but the look Lang returned was still cold. "We've scanned the victim's body. Ordinarily, I'd say our next step would be to perform a psychometric scan on Gruschenko's apartment. In this case though, it looks like Gruschenko's paranoia extended even to his choice of sleeping arrangements. Apparently, the records of his bank accounts indicate he maintained a dozen different apartments and hotel rooms at any one time. What's more, the Teks told me they've found evidence he also leased another two dozen apartments under a variety of aliases. Most of the leases only run a month, so it looks like Gruschenko let the leases lapse on one set of apartments, then rented a couple of dozen more each and every month. As close as anyone can figure it, it seems he made sure he slept in a new place every night. Presumably, he lived that way to make it harder for people to track him. The point is, though, it makes these apartments useless for our purposes. Even if we scanned them all, Gruschenko probably didn't stay in any of them long enough to leave

significant psychic traces behind. The guy changed homes like other people change their socks."

"So we're stymied, then?" Lang shifted in her chair in discomfort. "We don't have any real leads, and there's nothing we can do with our powers to change it?"

"I wouldn't quite say stymied." Anderson shrugged. "Admittedly, there's no better feeling than when you use your powers and they let you solve a case in a matter of seconds. Sometimes though, you have to do things differently. Like I said, it's time we did some old-fashioned police work. Remember, we're not totally in the dark here. The psi-scan of Gruschenko's body, Hemmings's witness statement, and forensic evidence from the crime scene have already given us several things to go on - even if the different accounts do seem to contradict each other at times. We know we're looking for two killers. We know one of them is a boy and the other is probably a mutant. Then, there's the message they left: 'Your sins will find you out'. You don't go carving words into a dead man's torso unless the message is important somehow."

"Your sins will find you out," Anderson repeated the message again, saying the words out loud as she felt a tingling warmth at the back of her scalp. She knew the sensation of old. It meant her unconscious was trying to tell her something. "I get the feeling that's the key to this whole case. If we can only find out why the killers wrote it on Gruschenko's body, I think maybe the entire case will break wide open." She paused, waiting to see if whatever was in her unconscious could push itself to the surface. But she drew a blank. "Either way, we better get started. I get the feeling it's only a matter of time before our perps kill again."

"You do?" Lang said. "Why?"

"It's just a feeling," Anderson said. "Call it intuition, or a plain dumb hunch, but this whole thing - strangling the victim, then cutting a message into his body - it has the whiff of unfinished business about it. After all, why strangle Gruschenko at all? They had a knife with them. Why didn't they just stab him and be done with it? No, strangling someone is more intimate. It allows you to watch the victim's death; to feel every moment of his suffering as he struggles for breath. It's crime born of passion: in this case, extreme hatred. And the message - your sins will find you out. It suggests they were punishing Gruschenko for something. At the same time, though, it reads as a warning. Almost as though the perps were telling

someone else they would be coming for them." She shrugged again. "I don't know. It's hard to say exactly what's going on here. But, whatever it is, I'm certain it won't end with Gruschenko."

They were alone now in the briefing room. The other Judges had left, no doubt headed for the Sector House's vehicle garage and hangar bay to mount up on Pat Wagons, H-Wagons and Lawmasters in preparations for the coming raids. In their place, there was silence as Anderson and Lang both contemplated the case before them.

For all she had attempted to reassure Lang that there were still avenues in the case they could work on, Anderson knew she was clutching at straws. It could be that the kind of grunt work she had talked about would turn up some new and vital leads. Equally, she was aware it could all turn out to be busy work; a waste of their time. Experience had taught her, though, that you never gave up on a case. You kept working at it, if necessary by taking a scattergun approach and pursuing areas of investigation almost at random. There was another truism she had long had plenty of time for: if you throw enough mud at a wall, some of it will stick. In this case, if they tried to approach the Gruschenko homicide from a series of different angles, there was always the possibility they might chance on some facet or nuance of the evidence that would lead them right to the killers. True, it was a long shot, but in the absence of anything more solid to go on, it currently looked like their best bet.

At the same time, there was another aspect to the case that concerned Anderson. She had been assigned to work alongside Lang and judge her emotional state. If they abandoned the investigation and tried to chalk Gruschenko's death off as an unsolved, there was every likelihood that Psi-Judge Vinley would immediately ask Anderson for her assessment of Lang. Right now, the idea made her uncomfortable. From what she had seen so far, it was clear to Anderson that Lang was wound tight; maybe more tight than it was healthy for a Psi-Judge to be. Still, she dreaded the thought of what might happen if she told Vinley that. She had to give Lang every opportunity to prove she could handle the pressure, and to show the things that were said about her were wrong. Perhaps it was that she felt lingering guilt over the fact she had had to lie to Lang earlier about the precise reasons she had been assigned to the case, or simply a matter that they were both Psi-Judges. Whatever the reason, Anderson had already decided she

would give the rookie every chance to prove herself. The dictates of her conscience would not let it be any other way.

"So, I'll get on the line with MAC, then?" Lang was the first to break the silence. "I'll ask for an analysis to be run on the killer's MO, like you said before."

"Good," Anderson said. "In the meantime, I'll talk to PSU about that surveillance analysis." She paused, as a new thought occurred to her. "Tell you what: when you contact MAC, ask the Teks if they can also input the details of our suspects and see if there have been any earlier sightings of them. We're talking about a boy and giant, after all. They can't have entirely escaped noticed. A duo like that is strange enough to stand out even in the Big Meg. I mean, I know this city is renowned for its weirdness.

"But, even in Mega-City One, there is such a thing as being even weirder than normal."

NINE

THE PAST, SET ASIDE AND LOCKED AWAY, PENDING

It was morning. The beginning of a brand new day.

A great believer in routine, Joseph Kapinski awoke in the same manner he had on every morning for the last ten years. The clock beside his bed nudged him musically from sleep at six-thirty sharp, the pre-programmed sound of its alarm taking the form of a tuneful symphony of gently chiming bells. Relieved to find he had passed through the night intact, he immediately pressed his right forefinger three times against the synthi-wood surface of his nightstand.

"Touch wood," Joseph muttered softly to himself, as was his habit.

In accordance with his other habits, as he rose from bed he touched his left foot to the floor first. He put on his slippers, then he took the dressing gown hanging neatly beside his bed and wrapped it around him, showing great care to make sure the bows by which he tied the belt were of equal length. Yawning, he eased past the sealed plasteen boxes and packing crates stacked all around his bed and made for the kitchen. He passed more boxes on the way. They were piled, floor-to-ceiling, either side of the hallway, leaving only a small corridor between them to allow him passage.

Squeezing his way into the kitchen, likewise full to the brim with boxes, he went to the counter where the materials of his breakfast were already laid out and ready. A bowl of plasti-flakes, a spoon and a cold ready-made cup of synthi-caf which he had prepared the night before. Finding the spoon was lying unaccountably askew in its place beside the bowl, he frowned for an instant, and pressed his forefinger three times against the counter. Next, picking up the spoon, he went to the nearest open box and placed the offending utensil inside it.

"Least said, soonest mended," he muttered. It was another one of his little habits.

Closing the top of the box so the spoon was no longer in sight, Joseph turned to the cutlery drawer and pulled it open, checking the condition of each of the spoons inside in turn until he found one to please him. Then, laying the spoon down on the counter so it was perfectly lined up by the side of the bowl, he retrieved his cup of synthi-caf and placed it inside the microwave oven. Setting the timer for precisely thirty-eight seconds at high

power, he turned the device on and watched for a moment as the cup began to turn inside the machine. While the beverage re-heated he tried to fetch a carton of synthi-milk from inside his refrigerator, only to find to his alarm there were so many boxes piled by the side of it that it was difficult to open the door.

Briefly, a feeling of panic swept over him. He felt his chest tighten, the pulse at his temple pounding as hard and fast as his heart. Shaking, he took deep breaths and turned his mind to calming thoughts. Closing his eyes, he envisioned himself lying still and motionless in a serene white room, and used the techniques his therapists had taught him.

This room is my mind, he told himself. There is nothing to harm me here. There is nothing to be feared once I am inside it. When I am in the white room, I am always safe.

The spasm passed. His panic subsided. His pulse and his heart rate slowed, and returned to normal. His equilibrium restored, Joseph opened his eyes again and cautiously moved one of the boxes slightly to one side to allow him to open the refrigerator door. Taking the carton of synthi-milk from inside it, he quickly poured some over his plasti-flakes, mindful not to spill or drip any on the countertop. Next, replacing the carton in the refrigerator, he closed the door and moved the box back in place, spending several minutes shifting it fractionally back and forth until he was absolutely sure it was in exactly the same place as it had started. Pronouncing himself satisfied at last, he turned back to his breakfast, only to find himself confronted by sudden disaster.

He had spent so long re-positioning the box, his cup of synthi-caf had cooled and his plasti-flakes had gone soggy. His breakfast was ruined.

Sighing, he scraped the contents of the bowl into his kitchen dispose-all and poured the synthi-caf down after it. Cleaning the bowl, spoon and cup as the grinder in the dispose-all pulverised the remains of his abortive breakfast, Joseph picked up a towel to pat them dry and packed them away in another box. Then, he turned to the kitchen cupboards, the contents inside all shrink-wrapped and labelled, and set about making his breakfast again.

Abruptly, as he opened the door to the cupboard where he kept the plasti-flakes, he heard a small voice inside him, reminding him of the vow he had made only the night before. Last night, like every other night it seemed in as long as he could remember, before lying down to sleep he had promised

himself the next day would be different. Come morning, he had told himself, he would begin to clear away the detritus that cluttered his life. He would go through the hundreds of boxes and crates that clustered in ceiling-high stacks throughout his apartment, he would sort through them and choose only those things inside that were of value, then he would throw the rest away. It was the same vow he made each and every night. Now, in the cold light of day, he reached the same decision he did every morning.

Tomorrow. He would leave it all until tomorrow.

Admittedly he had been promising himself the same thing for years, but this time he told himself he meant it. Tomorrow, he would clear the boxes away. Tomorrow, he would feel stronger. Tomorrow, he would overcome the tyranny of his fears and start his life afresh. Convinced that tomorrow, finally, his resolve would stand firm, he redoubled his efforts towards making breakfast. Tomorrow, he reassured himself, the thought like a prayer deep within his heart. Tomorrow, he would begin his life again, writing a new chapter in the book of his existence.

For Joseph Kapinski, there was always a tomorrow.

It was morning. The beginning of a brand new day.

It had been a long night. First, they had killed the man called Jimmy Nayles. Then, there had been all the hurry and bustle at the warehouse as the news spread that Jimmy Nayles was dead. In the space of barely an hour everything inside the warehouse had been packed up and put into vans to be taken away. Now, Leonard and Daniel sat in the back of a hover van with the other mutant workers as Freddie Binns drove them down towards City Bottom. But though Leonard was tired, and looked forward to sleep, Daniel did not seem ready yet to let go of his vengeance.

Remember your promise, Daniel said as they sat in the back of the hover van. *You said you'd help me with the bad men. We should punish another one today, before you go to sleep. I don't want to have to wait until tonight*.

The next one doesn't live far away, Daniel said, after another moment, continuing the theme. *We could go there and be back within the hour. We should go there now. I shouldn't have to wait until tonight*.

The windows in the back of the van were tinted so people outside couldn't see inside them, but one glance at the lightening sky in the distance told Leonard that daylight was fast approaching.

"But it's nearly dawn," he said to Daniel. "And I'm really tired."

He felt a vague current of unease pass through the van. Looking about him, Leonard saw the other mutants shift in their seats as they tried to pull further away from him without his noticing. Abruptly, he realised his mistake. He had spoken to Daniel out loud. To the other mutants, unaware of the boy's invisible presence, it no doubt seemed he was talking to himself. They probably thought he was crazy.

It's going to be daylight soon, he told Daniel, careful this time to think the words in his head the way the little boy had taught him, instead of saying them aloud. A guard sat in the front of the van next to Freddie, and as Leonard continued his conversation with Daniel he saw the man gaze at him in suspicion. In response, Leonard tried to keep his face emotionless, concentrating on stopping his lips from moving as he spoke to Daniel. *You know I shouldn't go about in daylight. People might see me*.

But we can go through the sewers, Daniel said. The boy's voice was insistent. *It'll be just like last time. Nobody will see you, Leonard. And it will only take an hour. Remember what you promised me*.

As he spoke, Daniel's face was set in an uncompromising line. It was an expression Leonard had seen often enough in the past to know there would be no use in arguing. Once Daniel had an idea in his head, he refused to give it up. He would go on and on about it, until Leonard finally gave in.

All right, Leonard said at last. The hover van had left the streets and megways of the Big Meg behind and was descending towards City Bottom. *Once Freddie drops us at the hostel, we'll go find one of the bad men*. He sighed, as much in weariness as in sadness. *We'll find one and then we'll kill him*.

Satisfied by his answer, Daniel turned to look out the window and watch the world go by as the van slowly dropped down to City Bottom. Meanwhile, sitting beside him, Leonard thought of what lay ahead of them and felt sorry for the next man they would kill - whoever it might be.

He only hoped, this time, Daniel did not want him to cut any more messages into the body.

"All right, everybody out," Freddie said as the van pulled up outside the hostel. He pressed a button on his steering column and the side door of the van slid open. "I'll pick you all up tonight, at the usual place. 'Til then, get some sleep. There's going to be a lot of work tonight, getting the coffee lab back on track at a new location. Who knows, if we get things up and

working fast, maybe the bosses might even pay everybody a ten-cred bonus." He turned in his seat and smiled at the mutants as they exited the van. "An extra ten credits each, boys. Think of that. I told you I'd help you all make money. Stick with me, friends. Freddie Binns will see you all right."

With that, Freddie closed the door and drove off, the hover van kicking up a choking flurry of dust as it rose clear of the darkness of City Bottom and made for the more lighted climes of the criss-crossing streets of the mega-city high above their heads. Yawning and muttering amongst themselves, the mutants turned to trudge wearily towards the hostel. Listening to them as they walked away, Leonard heard a familiar litany of complaints.

The majority opinion among the mutant labourers who worked in the coffee lab seemed to be that Freddie Binns was cheating them somehow. They complained about the quality of the clothing and food he brought for them. They complained about the place he had found for them to live; about the lack of amenities, and about how the nearest source of running water was a broken leaking pipe half a kilometre away. Most of all they complained about the prices Freddie charged for these services, and the deductions he made from their wages to cover breakages and his expenses. Admittedly, by the time Freddie had finished with his weekly deductions, the mutants were rarely allowed to keep more than a few credits from their wages as their own. All the same though, Leonard found his fellow mutants' dislike of their charge-boss to be confusing. It was hardly Freddie's fault if living in the city cost money. Besides, so far as Leonard could see, the mutants should be grateful.

The mutants owed everything to Freddie Binns. They relied on him for so many things: food, clothing, shelter, never mind their jobs. True, Freddie charged for all these services. True, he lived up in the city in luxury while the mutants were forced to live in the hostel. True, the place wasn't even really a hostel - it was a ruined apartment house, falling apart and abandoned like hundreds of other similar buildings all along City Bottom. Still, to Leonard's way of thinking, none of these things were Freddie's fault. The charge-boss could not be held responsible for the fact Leonard and the others had to live where they did. City Bottom was one of the few places in the city that the Judges almost never visited. That made it a safe haven for mutants. If Freddie's workers tried to live anywhere else in the

city, all they would get for their troubles would be a quick ride back to the Cursed Earth. No, to Leonard's eyes, Freddie Binns was his saviour. Without him, Leonard would have never experienced the benefits of civilisation.

"You know, you've become a real civilised-looking mutie in the time I've known you, Lenny," Freddie had said to him once. "I remember what you looked like when I first found you. You remember that? Not that I'm casting aspersions, but the first time we met you put me in mind of one of them savage muties from the Cursed Earth like you see in the shows on Tri-D. You ever seen a Tri-D player, Lenny? Let me tell you, they're the bee's nuts. Maybe, if you earn enough money, you'll be able to buy a player one day and watch Tri-D for yourself. Wouldn't that be something! Anyway, first time I saw you, carrying that spear and dressed all in furs like some caveman from way-back-when, I'll admit I had my doubts. I thought to myself, there ain't no way this guy has got what it takes to make it in the city. But look at you now - wearing shoes and that nice new coat I brought you. You look civilised, Lenny. And for a civilised man in this city, the sky's the limit. Break my neck if I am lying."

"Break my neck if I am lying." It was one of Freddie's favourite expressions: the charge-boss used it all the time. But Leonard, who had broken more than a few necks over the years for one reason or another, would no more have tried to hurt Freddie than he would have Daniel. Granted, he did not see Freddie as a friend so much; Daniel was Leonard's only friend. In the time since he had met Freddie, though, Leonard had come to trust the charge-boss.

Admittedly, Freddie tended to exaggerate things at times. Leonard hadn't been wearing furs when he came to the city, though his clothes had been pretty threadbare and ragged. Nor had he been barefoot: though, again, the boots he had been wearing back then had holes in them and had seen better days. Granted, he had been carrying a spear, but that was only because he had made one to hunt with after he had run out of ammo for his rifle on the long trek from the Peterson farm to the city. The Petersons were the family who had raised Leonard in the Cursed Earth. They were his adopted family, not his real family, but they had raised him and taken care of him as good as though he had really been their blood. They had given him food and shelter, and taught him the ways of the wilderness, same as Freddie Binns was now

teaching him the ways of the city. Freddie had guided Leonard ever since he had come to the city and he had never yet steered him wrong.

As for all the other stuff, the wage deductions and charges that Freddie imposed on the mutants, Leonard had come to understand it was part of the big thing called "civilisation" that Freddie talked about all the time. Civilisation was what living in Mega-City One was all about it. It meant you lived in an apartment, even if it was in a ruined building without windows. It meant you had money, and you used it to buy food and clothing. It meant you lived in safety, not having to spend all your time worrying whether raiders or Gila Munjas were going to try and sneak up on you to kill you.

Really, when Leonard thought about it, this whole civilisation thing didn't seem half bad.

We should get going, Daniel said. The boy's voice was impatient. *We need to head north. There's an old access hatch to the sewers about half a kilometre away.*

Ahead, the other mutants had entered the hostel, leaving Leonard and Daniel standing alone amid the rubble and deserted streets of City Bottom as the sun began to rise. Reluctantly, Leonard took a last look at the hostel, thought about how much he needed his bed, and turned to begin walking in the direction Daniel had told him. As he did so, it occurred to him that while civilisation was all fine and good, there were things that were more important. Friendship, for one. Daniel was his friend, and that meant sometimes Leonard had to do things for him even if he didn't want to.

In this case, it meant somebody else was going to die.

It was a longer journey than Daniel had said. Leonard did not own a watch, but it seemed to take them hours. They went via the sewers, then from the sewers into the maze of underblock maintenance tunnels that ran everywhere beneath the city. From the maintenance tunnels, they made their way into the ventilation ducts of the housing block where the bad man lived, climbing higher and higher towards their destination. Until, at last, pushing aside a flimsy air-conditioning grille, Leonard finally emerged inside the bad man's apartment.

From there, like every step of the way before it, he simply did what Daniel told him.

Joseph Kapinski was cleaning his teeth in the bathroom when he heard the crash.

Assuming one of the boxes stacked throughout the apartment had simply shifted and fallen to the floor, he calmly placed his toothbrush back in the cup beside the sink and went to investigate. Checking the hallway and finding no sign of disturbance, he turned towards the living room, his mind filled with thoughts of tomorrows.

All through the morning, as he prepared his breakfast and saw to his ablutions, the same words had repeated endlessly in his head in a relentless mantra. Tomorrow, he told himself, he would clear the apartment and clean away all the detritus that cluttered his life. Tomorrow, he would not allow his resolve to waver. Tomorrow, he would be feeling stronger. Tomorrow, he would begin his life anew.

Like most people he took his tomorrows for granted, believing they extended in front of him endlessly, reducing the moment of his death to a small and distant prospect. Occasionally he was troubled by thoughts of his own mortality, but for the most part he relegated such considerations to a dim corner of his mind in much the same manner as he had sequestered the leavings of his past in the thousands of boxes stacked all around his apartment. Inside them lay every object that had passed through his hands over the last thirty-odd years. He would have found it hard to give voice to the idea, but in many ways the contents of the crates and boxes that choked his apartment were like dusty memories stored in darkness and shadow to keep them far from prying eyes. His past had been set aside and locked away, pending redemption. A redemption that came, never today, but always tomorrow.

If there was one thing that gave Joseph Kapinski the strength to carry on with his life it was this: he believed in tomorrow. He believed in it fervently. Today, he always succumbed to weakness. Today, he was constrained by fear. Today, he was shackled by the past. But, tomorrow, things would be different. Tomorrow, he would finally find the strength to confront his fears and step forward into a bright new future. Tomorrow, he would begin his life anew.

Stepping into the living room and making his way through the tall stacks of crates that filled the room, he saw a box lying on its side on the floor. The lid of the box had fallen open, spilling its contents across the room in

wild disarray. He felt his pulse quicken, and turned once more to the exercises his therapists had taught him to keep his anxieties at bay.

It is only a box, he told himself. He found his hands were shaking. You can't be hurt by what's inside it.

Going to the box, he began to retrieve its spilled contents to place them back within it. The objects were all shrink-wrapped and labelled: old 2-D photographs, used food wrappers, a stuffed teddy bear he had owned as a child. Working hurriedly, trying not to look at the objects, he put them back inside the box, eyes nervously scanning the floor to make sure he had not missed anything. Abruptly, he noticed the air-conditioning vent in the living room had been damaged. The front grille cover of the vent was lying on the floor, the metal housing of the vent itself expanded and pushed wide as though something large had squeezed its way out from inside it.

Confused, Joseph advanced to inspect the vent. The plasti-steel screws designed to hold the grille cover in place had been broken. Looking around him, it occurred to him that the box had not fallen on its own. Someone, or something, had entered the living room via the air-conditioning vent and pushed aside the stack of boxes in front of it, accidentally dislodging the box at the top of the stack and causing it to fall. There was an intruder inside his apartment.

Joseph felt his chest tighten as a spasm of anxiety shot through him. An intruder! Here, in the apartment with him. He should call the Judges. He should...

He saw a dark shape suddenly rear up from behind a nearby stack. Before he could call out, or even scream, Joseph felt powerful hands clamped around his throat. As the intruder lifted him from his feet and slammed him back against a stack of boxes behind him, from the corner of his eye Joseph saw more boxes fall. They seemed to tumble through the air in slow motion, the contents spraying in crazy cartwheels.

He could not breathe. His heart beat madly in his chest in terror. Looking at his killer, Joseph felt vague, dull surprise to see the face of a child staring back at him. The boy's eyes seemed to burn with fire. He saw the child's lips move, mouthing words, but the rush of blood pounding through Joseph's ears meant he could not hear them. The world began to go dark as, in a last moment of terrified reckoning, Joseph Kapinski realised he had been wrong.

There would be no more tomorrows.

TEN

LESS THAN NOWHERE

"This is some kind of mistake," the perp said. He looked at the two street Judges who were seated facing him across the table in the interrogation suite. "I mean, I was just going for a walk when suddenly all these Judges showed up. Next thing I know, they tell me I'm under arrest. I ain't ever committed a crime in my entire life. Ask anybody-"

"Thomas Errol Calhoun," one of the Judges said, producing a small hand-held comp-unit and gazing down at the display. "Three previous arrests for Possession Of An Illegal Substance With Intent To Use. You've served a total of five years' cube time for those offences, along with compulsory rehab to cure your sugar addiction." Laying the comp-unit down on the table, the Judge regarded the perp with a withering stare. "And here you are again, Calhoun. Picked up in a raid on the location of a known criminal enterprise." He sneered in derision. "Looks like the rehab didn't take."

"You think we didn't run your prints, genius?" the other Judge said. "We know all about you, Calhoun. Same as we know you work for Jimmy Nayles. Now, do you want to drop the 'I'm an innocent citizen' act? Or do we have to add Lying To A Judge to the list of charges?"

"Charges?" Panic flared briefly in the perp's eyes. "Listen, I'm telling you there's been a mistake. I don't know who this Jimmy Nayles guy is, or Thomas Calhoun for that matter. I don't care what the fingerprints say. There must have been a screw-up with the system. My name is Doug Wend. I'm a kneepad salesman, for drokk's sake!"

"How long do you think before he realises it ain't no use and decides to give up on that story?" the first Judge said, turning to the other Judge beside him. He jerked a thumb at the perp on the other side of the table. "You were right when you called this guy a 'genius' before. You know, I'm beginning to think we may be sharing a room with one of the greatest criminal masterminds the world has ever seen."

"'Cause he's acting so dumb, you mean?" the second Judge asked. They both ignored the perp, treating him as though he was invisible while the man listened to them with his eyes and mouth wide open. "He knows we got him bang to rights, but still he keeps sticking to same old story."

"But it ain't a story!" the perp said, suddenly breaking in to their conversation. "I'm telling you, it's the truth-"

"You hear anybody asking for your opinions about anything, genius?" the first Judge cut the perp off, silencing him with a glare. He turned back to the second Judge. "Yeah, you ask me, that takes a special kind of genius. It's like, he thinks if he just sticks to his story long enough, we'll fall for it. Like, if he keeps saying he's innocent, we'll decide he's so dumb he must be telling the truth."

"Yeah, he's good at it, too," the second Judge said, warming to the theme. "Acting dumb, I mean. You notice, he doesn't even seem to have asked himself how come we're not playing good cop/bad cop with him? Guy like this, you'd think he'd been through enough interrogations to know that's how these things go. You think he'd figure, hey, if the Judges ain't playing good cop/bad cop, it must be because they don't think they need to. Our boy here though, he's too cool for that. He just stays acting dumb, like the thought of it never occurred to him."

"It's like I said, he's a criminal mastermind," the first Judge offered in agreement. "You ever seen that show on Tri-D about the detective solving cases in old-time Brit-Cit? You know the one. The hero is this tall thin guy with a long nose. He wears a funny hat, and always uses a magnifying glass to examine the crime scene. 'It's elementary, my dear Watson.' That's his catchphrase. What's the name of the villain on that show?"

"Moriarty," the second Judge answered him. "Professor Moriarty."

"Yeah, that's right," the first Judge nodded. "That's what we've got here. Our very own Professor Moriarty." He turned to stare hard at the perp. "What about it, Moriarty? You decided it's time to change your story yet?"

"You have to believe me," the perp said, shifting uneasily in his chair. "This is all a mistake. My name is Doug Wend and I sell kneepads. I've never taken a grain of sugar in my life!"

"Listen to him." The first Judge shook his head and whistled through his teeth. "No matter what happens, he sticks to his story. The guy's a genius. I mean, it ain't just the good cop/bad cop thing. By now, he has to have started wondering how come we haven't used a lie detector or taken a DNA sample to disprove his story. He must have asked himself why we're so calm about things. He must have considered the idea that it means we got an ace up our sleeves: something that's going to blow him out of the water, and we're just biding our time before we bring it out."

"Oh, sure, he's thought of that." The second Judge yawned and began to stretch his shoulders as though he was growing weary of the game. "But Moriarty here knows he can beat anything. He's a criminal mastermind, and we're just a couple of dumb schmuck street Judges. This whole time we've been sitting here, doing our comedy double act like Hooty and Gleev, he's probably been looking down his nose at us. Probably thinks we're a pair of ignorant mouth-breathers." Finishing his stretching, the Judge joined his partner in staring hard at the perp. "Course, what he doesn't know, is the joke's on him. That the only reason we're sitting here is because we're waiting for someone else to join us."

The door to the interrogation suite opened and a slim, attractive woman in a Judge's uniform entered the room. With a nod to the two street Judges, she advanced towards the perp.

"Calhoun, this is Anderson," the first Judge said. "In case you didn't spot what it says on her badge, she's a Psi-Judge. A telepath. In accordance with Judicial Order three-oh-three, Sub-section eight, Paragraph two, I am required to inform you that you are about to undergo a compulsory deep telepathic probe. You might want to take a few deep breaths there and do your best to attempt to relax, citizen.

"I hear it only hurts if you try to resist."

"He's just a low-level sugar dealer," Anderson said as she returned to the observation room adjoining the interrogation suite and saw that Lang was waiting for her. "Strictly a small-timer. He was on his way to a stash house for a re-up when he got caught in the sweep. He knew Jimmy Nayles was the boss of the mob he worked for, but that was about it. He had never actually met Gruschenko, or seen him. He didn't even know the Organizatsiya were running things."

"So he gets us nowhere, then?" Lang said.

She was standing beside the large two-way mirror that looked into the Interrogation Suite. Through it, two street Judges could be seen dragging the struggling perp away to the iso-cubes while he complained at the violation of his mind. With a grimace, Lang switched off the intercom on the wall beside her, cutting off the perp's complaints in mid-sentence.

"Pretty much," Anderson agreed with her. "What about you? Did you get anything useful from the perps captured in the other raids?"

"Not much," Lang shook her head. "There was some minor info on gambling dens and organ legging that might be of interest to the Organised Crime Units but so far, as regards our murder, I've performed deep telepathic scans on half-a-dozen perps without finding a single new lead. It's like you say: the perps have all heard of Jimmy Nayles, but they don't know him and they haven't met him. From what I hear, Operation Lazarus was a complete failure. All the raids turned up were some empty warehouses and a few small-fry perps. The entire operation turned out to be a waste of time."

"Yeah, that's what I hear, too," Anderson said. "From the sound of it, the Organizatsiya must have got word that Gruschenko was dead and cleaned everything out." She shrugged. "Still, I wouldn't go shouting that opinion out too loudly hereabouts unless you want to make enemies of the Sector House hierarchy. After putting so many resources into these raids, no one is going to admit the operation was a wash-out. No doubt, they'll give out news releases to the media in an hour or so, trumpeting Lazarus as a great success. 'A telling blow against organised crime in this city.' That kind of thing. It's politics. Nobody wants to admit that Judges are just as human and prone to mistakes as everybody else."

"Where does that leave us, then?" Lang asked. "We were hoping the Lazarus raids would scare up some new leads on the Gruschenko killing. Right now, they look to have got us nowhere."

"Agreed," Anderson said. "Frankly, at this precise moment in time I'd say we're at somewhere less than nowhere. You remember the calls we put in to MAC and PSU, asking for info on earlier sightings of the perps, and so on? I've had some calls back and it seems like we're batting zero on every front. The only area that's produced any new information is when I asked the Organised Crime Unit for the low-down on Gruschenko's potential enemies. They came back with a list as long as my arm. Not surprisingly, given he was a mob boss, Konrad Gruschenko was a man with a lot of enemies. Honestly though, I'd be surprised if any of Gruschenko's business rivals were behind the murder. When you want to kill a mob boss, you hire someone to shoot him or put a bomb in his car. Everything about this killing - the strangulation, the message carved into the victim's body - suggests a more personal motive. I don't think we---"

"Control to Anderson!" Abruptly, Anderson's radio blared into life. Her hand going automatically to the radio unit on her belt, she pressed the

transmit button and responded to the call.

"Anderson receiving, Control. Over."

"Just had an update from MAC," the dispatcher told her, his voice terse over the airwaves. "I understand you requested notification earlier this morning of any homicides matching the MO of the murder of Konrad Gruschenko, AKA James Nales."

"Affirmative to that, Control." Exchanging a significant look with Lang, Anderson boosted the volume of her radio so the other Psi-Judge would be able to hear it clearly. "What have you got for us?"

"A homicide at Sigmund Freud Block. According to the first Judges on the scene, the victim was strangled and a message was found carved into his torso. The words were: 'Your sins will find you out'. That sound like it matches your case?"

"Word for word, Control. You said 'Judges on the scene'? Am I to take it this is an ongoing investigation, not a cold case from the files?"

"Affirmative to that Anderson. Like I said, I just received the update from MAC - otherwise, I would have let you know about the crime earlier. The homicide was called in forty minutes ago by one of the victim's neighbours.

"Looks like, whoever your killer is, he's been a busy boy."

ELEVEN

MEMENTO MORI

Anderson had seen a lot of crime scenes over the years, but for pure Mega-City weirdness few could compare to the scene awaiting her inside the apartment at Sigmund Freud. As she stepped through the doorway with Lang behind her, she saw the apartment's hallway was stacked floor-to-ceiling with row after row of crates and boxes. A cramped passageway had been left down the centre of the hall in-between the stacks to allow access to the rest of the apartment, but the overhanging piles of boxes either side had encroached on even this slender space. As she advanced along it she was forced to walk sideways, holding her breath at times as she attempted to squeeze through the narrow gaps.

"Looks like the victim was moving house," she heard Lang say behind her. "With all this stuff, it would have had to be to someplace bigger."

"No, I don't think he was moving anywhere," Anderson told her. Pausing, she ran a finger along the surface of one of the boxes and held it up for Lang to see it. "From the amount of dust on some of these, they've been here a long time." Picking a box at random, she pulled open the lid and glanced at the contents. She saw a broken plate, a selection of vid-slugs, some playing cards and a half-eaten Gooey Bar - all sealed, labelled, and vacuum-packed in plasteen shrink-wrap. Picking up the Gooey Bar to show it to Lang, she pointed at the label. "According to this, he wrapped this Gooey Bar eight years ago. Maybe the victim was some kind of collector."

"In that case, can't say I think much for his taste in collectibles." Following Anderson's example, Lang had opened another of the boxes. She lifted out a transparent bag filled with used tissues. "What kind of freak collects his own snot?"

"Probably a psych-case," Anderson said. Noticing another box was filled with specimen jars she inspected the contents, only to recoil with a wince of disgust. "Trust me, you're lucky you only found the tissues. Turns out that snot wasn't the only solid waste this guy collected."

"Anderson?" She heard a man's voice call to her down the hallway.

Turning, Anderson saw a street Judge had appeared at the end of the hall and was now beckoning them towards him. As she came closer, she saw the name on his badge read "Farnham".

"Control said you were coming," he told her. "And you must be Lang?" He nodded to the other Psi-Judge. "I take it you noticed the dÈcor?" He indicated the boxes.

"Yeah."

"The entire apartment's like this," Farnham said. "You'll have to watch your step - some of these stacks aren't put together too good and it doesn't take much to topple them. This whole place is one big Health and Safety violation. If the tenant wasn't dead, he'd be looking at cube time." He shook his head in disbelief. "I tell you, fifteen years on the streets and you think you've seen everything. But this guy was something else. It's like he was the ultimate pack rat. The guy never threw anything away. You realise he was even hoarding his own shit in jars? There's boxes full of the stuff."

"I noticed," Anderson said. "Where's the body?"

"This way," Farnham beckoned them towards a doorway off the hallway. "It's in the living room."

Like the hallway, the living room was packed with boxes. Following Farnham into the room, Anderson estimated there must be thousands of them, arranged in vast walls and towers of plasteen and synthi-board that choked every available centimetre of space. The only areas free of boxes were a narrow passageway left for access and two small islands of freedom around the sofa and the Tri-D player. Turning a corner with Farnham in the lead, Anderson saw that several of the stacks had collapsed in untidy disarray, leaving a mound of boxes at one end of the living room like the rubble from the fallen ramparts of a conquered city. A body lay on top of it, attended by a pair of weary Tek-Judges collecting forensic data. Registering the newcomers' arrival, the Teks glanced briefly at Anderson and the others before resuming their work.

The body was that of a middle-aged man wearing pyjamas and a dressing gown. From the outset it was clear this was the work of the same perps who had killed Konrad Gruschenko. The victim's eyes were red and swollen with internal haemorrhages; there were wide bruises around his throat; his tongue lolled from his mouth, distended and purple. Most pertinently, Anderson could see the man's pyjamas and dressing gown had been ripped open, revealing the same bloody message carved into the bony flesh of his torso.

Your sins will find you out.

"Fingerprints and DNA confirm the victim's name as Joseph Alvez Kapinski," Farnham said, pulling a comp-unit from his belt to check his facts. "Date of birth: 3/4/2071. Fifty-five years of age. Unemployed. No criminal convictions. According to the records, he's been receiving psychotherapy for the last twenty years. Diagnosed as suffering from obsessive-compulsive disorder, aggravated by acute collection mania."

"Guess that explains the boxes," Anderson said. "What else can you tell us about him?"

"Not much. Seems Kapinski didn't get out a lot. Neighbours say he kept himself to himself. Credit card records indicate he had his groceries delivered to him here from the block mart. Paid his bills and taxes over the Megaweb. The guy was pretty much a shut-in. I put a call in to his shrink to see if he could give me any more background, but I haven't heard back from him yet." He glanced at his wristwatch. "It's still outside office hours. That probably explains it."

"When the shrink does get in touch, can you forward any info he gives you?" Anderson asked. "We're currently working on the theory there's a personal angle to these killings. It could be that something in Kapinski's background may help us close in on the killers."

"I thought the other victim was a mob boss?" Farnham said. "Leastways, that's what Control said."

"He was," Lang joined the conversation. "But Anderson thinks the murder wasn't business-related."

"It's a hunch." Seeing the street Judge looking at both her and Lang in turn as though trying to read whether there was a disagreement between them, Anderson shrugged. "So far, we haven't got much else to go on. Speaking of which, what have you in terms of physical evidence? I take it a Med-Judge has examined the body."

"Yeah." Farnham's eyes returned to the display screen of his comp-unit as he scrolled through his notes. "Preliminary examination of the body indicates the cause of death was asphyxia resulting from manual strangulation. The wounds on the victim's chest - the words carved there, I mean - were inflicted postmortem. The Med-Judge found a microscopic metal fragment in one of the wound tracks: probably a piece of the knife that chipped off when the blade hit a rib. He gave it to the Teks for analysis, and they say it's high-carbon steel. Apparently, that means the weapon used to inflict the cuts was either a museum piece or it was hand-forged from a

lump of iron ore the old-fashioned way. Nobody uses steel for knife blades anymore. These days it's all plasti-steel, tungsten alloys, or hardened ceramics."

"Any guesses about what kind of knife it was?" Anderson asked.

"No." The street Judge shook his head. "The fragment was too small to be able to tell us anything more. Still, if you can find the knife, the Teks will be able to match the fragment to the blade. Apparently, it's as good as fingerprints."

"Trust me, if we find these perps we won't need to inspect the knife to identify them," Anderson said. "They'd tend to stand out in a crowd."

"Yeah, I heard," Farnham said. "Control said your profile of the perps indicates one is a kid and the other is a giant. That's one hell of a tag-team, even for this city." Turning away, the street Judge began to pick his way carefully through the fallen boxes and drew the Psi-Judges' attention to the living room wall. "Anyway, I figure there's something else here you'll want to see."

Squatting down by the wall Farnham carefully lifted one of the boxes aside, revealing a hole at the base of the wall where the grille cover of an air-conditioning vent had been torn open.

"Looks like this is how your perps gained entrance to the apartment," he said. "The Teks sent a remote surveillance-drone into the vents to try and pick up their trail. Seems the perps got in to the underblock maintenance tunnels via the sewers, then followed the tunnels up into the air-conditioning system."

"That fits," Anderson said. On the ride over from Sector House 45 she had received a forensics report from Tek-Judge Tolsen on the Gruschenko homicide. Downloading the file into her Lawmaster's computer, she had instructed her bike to use its audio-system to read her the edited highlights as she and Lang made their way to Sigmund Freud. "They used a similar approach when they killed the previous victim."

"Well, that about covers all the evidence that's been collected so far," Farnham said. Rising to stand once more, he turned back to face the two Psi-Judges. "There'll be more to tell you when the Teks have completed the forensics. But, given the state of this place..." He gestured to the towers of boxes all around them. "It's going to take a while."

"Understood," Anderson said as she removed one of her gloves. "All right, then. I'd appreciate it if you and the Teks could give us some time

alone with the body. We're going to do a psi-scan of the victim."

She turned towards Lang and gave her a disarming smile.

"So, do you want me to go first? Or do we flip a coin?"

He could not breathe. His heart beat madly in his chest in terror. Looking at the face of his killer, he felt vague, dull surprise to see a child staring back at him. The boy's eyes seemed to burn with fire. He saw his lips move, mouthing angry words, but the rush of blood pounding through his head drowned out the sound. The world began to darken. In a last moment of terrified reckoning, he realised he had been wrong.

There would be no more tomorrows.

"Did you see what I did?" Anderson said, afterwards. It was a few minutes later, and she and Lang had both completed separate psychic scans of the dead man's body. She felt a chill sadness run through her heart: the familiar emotion of loss that always came when she read the last memories of someone who had died a violent death. "It was exactly the same as last time. It's like the victim perceived his killers as one collective being. The killer was as tall and as strong as the giant, but when the victim looked at him he saw the face of the child. And then, there were the child's eyes. There was something in them. Hatred. Vengeance. Anger. I don't know what exactly, but whatever it was it was like the kid's eyes were on fire with it."

"I saw it," Lang whispered hoarsely. Her eyes were downcast and her cheeks were pale with nausea. The psi-scan seemed to have taken a great deal out of her. Watching as Lang put her hand gingerly to her own throat as though searching for non-existent bruises, Anderson was struck again by how young the other Psi-Judge seemed. Experiencing another person's death was hard enough at the best of times, but it only made it worse when you were a rookie virtually straight out of Psi-School.

Clearing her throat, Lang sighed and for a moment held her silence.

"Is it always like this?" she said, finally. "When you do a scan like this, do you always feel this sense of..." She paused as she considered her words. "I suppose, you'd call it sorrow. Do you always feel it? Or do you get used to it after a while?"

"You never get used to it," Anderson answered her. "Grud, I wish I could tell you that things get better. I wish I could say you develop a tough skin over time and it makes it all easier. But we're psychics. It doesn't work that

way. When you perform a psi-scan on a murder victim, you directly experience everything they went through at the point of their death. You feel every instant of their pain, their suffering, their fear and their horror. Worst of all, you realise the finality of it all. When one person murders another one, it takes away all the victim is, all they ever were, and all they might ever be. It's like the entire universe has lost something bright and special. Something unique. You feel it even when you scan a body like Konrad Gruschenko's. And when you scan someone like this guy? It only makes it worse."

"It felt like he was an innocent in all this," Lang said quietly. "When I scanned Gruschenko, I just knew he was a violent man - it was like I could sense it in every fibre of his... I don't know, his soul maybe. But, with Kapinski, there was nothing to indicate that he brought his death on himself." Lang paused once more, her expression growing yet more downcast. "I called him a 'freak' before. I feel guilty about it now. It felt like he was damaged somehow. Like he tried hard to live a normal life, but something inside him always stopped him. He wanted so desperately to be able to sort his life out. And now, he never will."

"No more tomorrows," Anderson said, echoing her thoughts.

"So? How did it go?" Hearing the sound of Farnham's voice behind her, Anderson saw the street Judge had re-entered the room while the two Tek-Judges hung back in the living room doorway. Glancing at Lang beside her, it was clear the sudden interruption had brought an end to their mutual period of mournful reflection. Turning away for a moment, when Lang turned back to face the world the hard edge of her features had been restored.

"Could have been better," Lang said. "We're certain Kapinski was murdered by the same perps who killed Gruschenko. But we don't seem any further along in trying to find them."

"Yeah, I'd say that about covers it," Anderson agreed. Inwardly, she found herself vaguely disturbed by the abrupt change in her partner's manner. In the hours they had spent in each other's company she had seen two faces to Lang. On one hand she wore the typical Judicial façade: stony, businesslike, and immune to emotion. But there was another face to the rookie Psi-Judge; one she tried hard to keep hidden.

Granted, Lang was hardly unique in that regard. Everyone wore two faces: the ordinary workaday face they wore to the world at large, and the

private face of their inner thoughts and emotions. What concerned Anderson was not so much that Lang had two faces. It was that there seemed such a wide gulf between them. Lang worked hard to project an outward appearance of confidence and self-reliance, but Anderson could sense the emotional turmoil beneath it. She had the impression that Lang was nowhere as near as much in control of herself as she tried to appear. There was a brittleness to the woman's manner; a fragility that lurked just below the surface. Once again, she thought of the report she would be expected to give to Psi-Judge Vinley when this assignment was over. Vinley would ask her whether, in her opinion, Lang had what it took to make the grade in Psi Division.

Right now, Anderson was not entirely sure if she knew the answer.

"What do you think, Anderson?" she heard Lang ask her. Realising she had fallen so deep in thought she had lost track of the conversation around her, Anderson saw that Lang and Farnham had turned to look at her expectantly.

"Sorry, I was miles away there for a minute," she said. "What were you saying?"

"I was just wondering what our next step should be," Lang said. There was the merest suggestion of suspicion in her eyes. Thanks to her own psychic shields, Anderson would have known if Lang had tried to surreptitiously perform a telepathic scan to read her surface thoughts. Still, she had the uneasy feeling that Lang was well aware she had been thinking about her.

"Yeah, about that..." Pausing in mid-sentence, Anderson gazed at the boxes stacked in the living room all around them. An idea suddenly presented itself. "You realise, there's one big difference between Joseph Kapinski and Konrad Gruschenko?"

"You mean that one was a mob boss and the other was an innocent citizen," Lang asked, not without a trace of sarcasm.

"I was talking more about the fact that Gruschenko might as well have been a cipher," Anderson said. "Think about it. The guy lived like a ghost. He lived under a false identity, with false fingerprints, a false face, false papers - hell, even his age was false. And, because of that, there's no way we can hope to get any real handle on him. I know I keep saying this, but I'm sure the motive behind these killings is deeply personal. There's real hatred here: not just in the MO of the killings and the messages carved into

the bodies, but even in that little boy's eyes. And yet, because of the way he lived his life, Gruschenko's past - his personal life, if he had one - is a mystery."

"But Kapinski's past isn't a mystery?" Lang said. "Is that what you're getting at?"

"Exactly," Anderson nodded. She waved a hand towards the stacks of boxes. "Kapinski's past is all here: hoarded, catalogued, even labelled. And, as strange as it may seem to us, all these things really meant something to Kapinski. You remember I said we'd be wasting our time trying to scan any of Gruschenko's hideouts. That he didn't stay in one place long enough to leave any kind of significant psychic impressions. But here, in this apartment, it's like the opposite is true. Did you notice anything unusual when you tried to scan Kapinski's body?"

"Now you mention it, I did." Lang's eyes clouded as she recalled the experience. "At first, when I was trying to connect to the psi-flux, it was like there was some kind of interference..."

"White noise," Anderson told her. "It's the boxes. Or rather, their contents. You've seen the junk inside them. Plasteen combs, old shoes, grocery bags. Kapinski was a shut-in. He spent his life surrounded by these things, night and day. They must have picked up stray psychic impressions like a sponge. Usually, when you perform a psychometric scan on an apartment, it can be difficult to pick up even a single impression. Here, there are thousands of them. Maybe even tens of thousands. All stacked on top of each other just like these boxes. When you think about it, we were lucky we could pick up anything at all from Kapinski's body. It's like this entire apartment is a radio receiver tuned to a thousand different channels at once."

"I'm sure this is all very interesting if you're a Psi-Judge." Farnham had been silent, but now he joined the conversation. "But I don't see how it's relevant to your investigation."

"It's relevant because every part of Kapinski's past is recorded in these boxes," Anderson said. "And I don't mean psychically. I mean physically. There's so many stray psychic impressions in here, if we started trying to scan the boxes I think we'd get nothing but gobbledegook. But, physically, the entire place is a treasure trove. If the contents of the boxes are sorted and catalogued, there's every chance we'll find something that links back to

the motive for these killings. And if we find the motive, we'll find our perps. I'm sure of it."

"Wait a minute." There was an edge of disbelief in Farnham's tone. "Are you suggesting we go through all these boxes? It could take weeks."

"I'm not just suggesting it, I'm ordering it," Anderson replied. "I don't want to pull rank, but I've been appointed the primary on this investigation."

"You're not serious?" Farnham's voice had risen; disbelief giving way to a note of belligerence. "What about how long it's going to take us? We're talking about the murder of a shut-in, for Grud's sake. It's not like this is a priority case. Get a grip, Anderson. This is the Big Meg. Murders happen all the time."

"You're right, they do," Anderson said. "But, in this case, we can stop more murders from happening. We're dealing with what looks like the beginning of a series of killings. That means more people are going to die unless we can find out what's driving this murder spree. Then, there's the fact that the killing here links back to the death of Konrad Gruschenko, and may or may not be connected with Gruschenko's criminal empire. You heard about the raids on suspected Organizatsiya operations earlier this morning?"

"Sure, I did. But I don't see-"

"Gruschenko had been running criminal enterprises under a variety of aliases throughout this city for nearly thirty years. Right now the Sector House authorities are concentrating on shutting down his operations, but when the dust settles there's going to be a lot of questions asked about how Gruschenko managed it. I don't mean the face changes and rejuve jobs, or even the false documents - with enough money and the right connections you can get hold of those things easily enough - the real question is how did Gruschenko stay ahead of the Justice Department for so long? Did he have contacts and informants inside the Department? Auxiliaries, filing clerks, maybe even Judges? I suspect that SJS are going to be all over the Gruschenko investigation by the time the day is out. And Kapinski was killed by the same perps who murdered Gruschenko. You said before that this wasn't a priority case? Me, I see things differently. So far, we've got serial killings, superhuman perps, a major organised crime conspiracy, possibly even Judicial corruption - all stuck together in one big ugly ball of wax. I don't want to overstate things. But, you ask me, unless Judge Death

suddenly walks through that door looking to dance the fandango, this case is about as high priority as it gets."

Realising the tone of her own voice had risen to match Farnham's, Anderson paused momentarily to regain her composure and allow her words to sink in to the minds of her listeners.

"Grud, it's going to be like looking for a needle in a haystack," Farnham said glumly. He looked at the boxes around them and shook his head in defeat. "All right. I'm going to have to call this in to Control first and update them about what we're doing here. But, after that, where do you want to begin?"

"I suppose we should each just pick a box at random and start work," Anderson said. She looked at the faces of the other Judges. Appalled at the scale of the task ahead of them, Lang and the two Tek-Judges wore identical grimaces. "When you contact Control though, you'd better ask them to send more manpower."

She glanced briefly once more at the interior of the apartment and its thousands of crates and boxes.

"I get the feeling we're going to need a lot more Judges."

TWELVE

KEEPING PROMISES

For Leonard, the killings he had committed that day did not end with the box man. It had been a strange experience, crawling from the air-conditioning vent to find he was in a room crammed with dusty boxes piled on top of each other like stacks of firewood. The first of the bad men he had killed for Daniel had been dangerous. The old man who looked young had been armed with a gun and carried himself with the walk of man who had killed before. The second man though, the box man as Leonard thought of him, had seemed helpless, almost pathetic. He had hardly even struggled as Leonard's hands closed around his throat; he had simply stared with eyes full of sadness and loss as his life faded away to darkness. Once more, Leonard was reminded of the fact that he had become a murderer. By taking cause with Daniel and following his friend's instructions, he had killed men he had no quarrel with nor any reason to hate. He had killed them simply because the boy had asked him to: an act of friendship that seemed destined to see more blood spilled before the day was through.

Killing the box man was not enough for Daniel. Nothing, it seemed, was enough to quell the hatred the boy felt deep in his soul.

Afterwards, when he had killed the box man and carved the message into his flesh, Leonard had been annoyed when Daniel began to talk about killing someone else.

"We should do one more today," Daniel had said, speaking aloud with no fear that anyone would hear them now the apartment's owner lay dead at their feet among a mound of fallen boxes. "There's another bad man who doesn't live too far away from here. We could go and kill him, and be back home within the hour."

"That's what you said last time, Daniel," Leonard had said. Hearing an element of harshness in his own voice, he regretted it at once. He was tired, and his temper was short. Daniel was his friend, but sometimes the demands the boy placed upon him made life hard. "I'm sorry, Daniel," he apologised. "I didn't mean to sound angry. It's just, I'm tired. It's been a long day, and I need to sleep. I've got to work again tonight."

"Just one more," Daniel had stared at him with wide round eyes. "He's not far away. And if we leave him 'til tonight, we'll have to come all this

way again. It's easier now, while he's close."

"But I'm tired, Daniel. I need my..."

"Please, Leonard," Daniel had pleaded. The boy's eyes had seemed on the verge of tears. "You promised."

It was there again. The agreement between them. Leonard would kill the bad man on Daniel's behalf, and Daniel in turn would help Leonard find his mother. It was a promise set in stone, and Leonard could no more walk away from it than he could bear the thought of never seeing his mother again. He remembered her so clearly, but only Daniel held it in his power to create a reunion.

"All right, Daniel," Leonard said tiredly. We will kill another bad man."

He hated crawling through vents. The sewers and the maintenance tunnels were not so bad, but they only extended from building to building. Once they came to the block where the bad man lived, Leonard was forced to leave the tunnels behind and enter the building's air-conditioning system. It was not the fact that the vents were dark: even if he had not had Daniel to guide him, he could have easily navigated his way through them. No, it was the lack of breathing room that Leonard disliked. He was accustomed to the wide open spaces of the Cursed Earth; breathing in fresh clean air and feeling the warmth of the sun on his face. To Leonard, being inside an air-conditioning vent felt like being buried alive.

Admittedly, to the people of Mega-City One the air in the Cursed Earth would have seemed neither too fresh nor altogether clean. There was something called fallout that Leonard had heard the guards at the coffee warehouse talk about amongst themselves. They had not liked working with mutants. The guards were afraid that Leonard and the others might have brought fallout with them on their clothes somehow; that it would infect the guards and give them cancer. At least, that was how it seemed to Leonard from the things he had heard them say. Like so much else about life in the city, he found he did not really understand it at all.

There was so little space inside the vents. His body was so big, and the walls of the vent were so tight around it, the only way that Leonard could move was to push with his feet and wriggle his body forward like a snake. It was hot and tiring work, and the stale air that blew through the system from time to time whenever someone turned on the air conditioner in their apartment only made it worse. The moment Leonard entered the vents he

quickly lost all track of time. He could not be sure whether he had been inside them for minutes or for hours. There was only the sense of constant movement as he wriggled forward, half a metre at a time, while Daniel whispered encouragement in his mind.

Keep going, Leonard, Daniel said. *You're nearly there now*.

Nearly there. Daniel had been saying those words for what seemed like hours. The same words, over and over, while Leonard huffed and grunted his way through the vents. His shirt was wet with sweat. His legs ached. His throat was dry. He felt a pounding pain at the back of his head, keeping time with Daniel's words.

Nearly there, Daniel said. *You're nearly there*.

Stop.

At last, the journey ended. After twisting and turning through endless branching vents, they came to a grille cover that looked out across the floor of one of the housing block's apartments. They had reached their destination: from the excitement he could hear in Daniel's voice, Leonard was sure of it.

This is the one, Leonard, Daniel said. *Charles Mayzell. He's one of the bad people. He's one of the men who hurt me*.

Pushing the grille cover open with ease, Leonard squeezed through the hole into the apartment. Standing, he found himself in a spacious room. At one end of the room there were a number of broad, free-standing lights on metal tripods; at the other there was a blank white screen that stretched across the entire wall. Confused, Leonard gazed around him for a moment and wondered at the purpose of the place. Then, hearing a voice from elsewhere in the apartment, he began to creep towards the sound.

"No, you listen, Chandra," as Leonard crept closer he began to hear the words more clearly. A man's voice. It sounded like he was talking to someone. "I don't care who she thinks she is. She was supposed to be here half an hour ago. I'm on a deadline. The clients at Mr Ooter's Succulent Synthi-Sausages want to see proofs for the new ad campaign on their desks by 15.00. And I can't start shooting the damn thing without my 'Mmmmm, Take A Bite' girl. So, where the drokk is she?"

The man's voice fell silent, but Leonard had already heard enough to track him. He walked into a hallway, noticing from the corner of his eye that the walls were lined with Tri-D pictures. Young women, most of them wearing very little clothing, posed in the pictures with their chests pushed

out, smiling as they drank beer, or brushed their teeth, or ate burgers. Leonard had seen similar pictures before, through the tinted windows of Freddie Binns's hover van as the charge-boss drove his mutant labourers back and forth. He had seen them on billboards, or projected onto the sides of buildings. Once, he had even seen a picture appear on the moon high overhead. Freddie had told him it was called advertising, and it was another wonderful part of the great big thing called civilisation.

"That's not my problem, Chandra," he heard the man's voice say. Leonard followed the sound, moving cautiously so the noise of his footfalls would not give him away. "And don't try and fob me off with excuses about rush hour traffic. She's a hyper-model, for drokk's sake. We both know she goes everywhere in a chauffeured hover limo."

The hallway led out into another large room. Stepping inside it, Leonard saw a man pacing impatiently across the floor as he talked into the mouthpiece of a wire headset. The man had a small box-like metal object in his hand. He fiddled with it restlessly as he continued to argue with a seemingly invisible listener.

"No, that's not good enough," the man said. "In fact, it's unprofessional. I booked her for a three-hour shoot. If she can't be bothered to show up, I've got a good mind to cancel the booking and get someone el-"

Suddenly, as Leonard moved within arm's reach, the man abruptly turned. As he saw Leonard approach him, his face went pale.

"Chandra? Uh... I think I'm going to have to call you back..."

They were the last words the man ever said.

THIRTEEN

UNEXPECTED IMAGES

It had taken a lot of calls back and forth to Control and the Watch Commander at Sector House 45, but within the hour Anderson had received the extra manpower she had requested. Given the city's current chronic shortage of qualified Judges, Farnham had been ordered back to street duties almost immediately. In his place, a dozen cadets from the Academy of Law had been sent to help the remaining Teks with the gargantuan job of sorting through Joseph Kapinski's effects under the hawkish gaze of one of their Judge-Tutors. "A useful field exercise," the Judge-Tutor had called it when she arrived at the apartment. A grizzled, stocky woman with a pair of creaking bionic limbs to replace the legs she had lost in the line of duty, she had set about her business with gusto, constantly barracking the cadets on the need to adhere strictly to the guidelines for handling forensic evidence when opening the boxes. Watching the Judge-Tutor at work, Anderson was given the impression the woman relished the task ahead of her, as though this brief re-assignment to an active investigation - no matter how fleeting - was something she had dreamed about for years.

At the same time, despite the promptness of the response to her requests, Anderson was under no illusions. She realised the fact that valuable resources had been diverted to aid her investigation had little to do with her own standing within the Justice Department. In the end, it was the Gruschenko angle that had decided the matter. Whatever the nature of the mysterious connection between the death of the Sov mob boss and the murder of Joseph Kapinski, it had been enough to persuade the Sector House authorities to support her efforts to crack the case. Ultimately, it was a question of politics - just as she had indicated to Lang earlier. For years, an extensive criminal network had flourished in Sector 45 under the very noses of the Judges. The belated discovery of that network meant the local Sector House hierarchy had been embarrassed. Naturally, they would now do everything in their power to cover their asses with both hands. There would be more raids and crackdowns. Strong words would ring out about being tough on crime. Judges would be encouraged to apply their sentencing powers in a draconian fashion, at least for the next few weeks

until their Watch Commanders and other bosses were assured their positions were safe.

Politics. Anderson was no knee-jerk reactionary. She supposed, among other Judges, she would be counted as rather a liberal. To her, though, the word "politics" left a dirty smell behind it. In her experience, the concepts of politics and justice were more than just uneasy bedfellows. They belonged to entirely different species.

Anderson was not a political animal by nature. Still, she was savvy enough not to look a gift horse in the mouth when it cantered up and offered her its bridle. She had a case to solve, and perps to capture. If the connection to Gruschenko and the Organizatsiya gave her the pull to achieve those aims, then she would make use of it to its fullest potential. Unlike some Judges of her acquaintance, she was no robot blindly adhering to a narrow definition of the Law in an attempt to make sense of the chaos of life in the city. No, her devotion to her job came from a more direct and telling imperative.

Time and again, as she performed her duties on the streets of the Big Meg she was reminded of the words of one of her psi-instructors, long ago in Psi-School.

"We aren't like other Judges," the instructor had told her. "All they care about is whether or not the Law has been broken. It's different when you're a Psi-Judge. Always remember: we speak for those who can no longer speak for themselves. We speak for the dead. We speak for the victim."

We speak for the dead. Throughout the twenty-something years that Anderson had served in Psi Division, those words had been her credo. She was not a religious person. She did not respect any higher power, nor see evidence of divine providence in the works of man. She did not believe there was a deity, watching earthly affairs from afar, who would descend to point out the guilty. No thunderbolt would ever come from the heavens to avenge the act of murder. In the absence of divine retribution it fell to human agencies, and human hands, to do what heaven could not.

We speak for the dead. Today, that meant she spoke for Joseph Kapinski. She spoke for Konrad Gruschenko. Good man or bad, it made no difference. Innocent and criminal, saint and sinner alike, she spoke for them both.

She spoke for Joseph Kapinski. She spoke for Konrad Gruschenko. Whether through hubris, or a simple dogged refusal to admit defeat, she felt

a certainty deep within her bones. She would not allow this case to go unsolved. Come what may, she would bring their killers to justice.

The only shame of it was that, by the time she made her first real breakthroughs in the case, another victim had died.

The call came in from Control perhaps an hour or so after the Cadets arrived. Anderson was checking through the contents of a box filled with used toiletries and old credit statements when she heard the dispatcher's voice call to her over the airwaves.

"Control to Anderson! Please respond!"

"Anderson receiving, Control. Over."

"Homicide at David Bailey Block. Judges on the scene report similarities to the Kapinski and Gruschenko killings. You are asked to get there ASAP. Can you respond? Over."

She looked at Lang and the Judge-Tutor standing nearby. The Judge-Tutor, Burnley, gazed at her with sharp, dark eyes.

"You'd better get going," Burnley said. "Both of you. I'll handle things at this end and let you know if anything comes up."

Nodding, Anderson's attention returned to her radio.

"Acknowledged, Control. Psi-Judges Anderson and Lang en route to the scene. ETA to David Bailey: fifteen minutes."

David Bailey was a luxury block, situated in one of the sector's better neighbourhoods and designed to cater for citizens with the money to pay for a higher standard of living than most of the Mega-City One's unemployed masses could afford. Guided unerringly to the block's location by the navigation systems in their bike computers, Anderson and Lang arrived in just under fourteen minutes. As they pulled into the parking bay in front of the building, Anderson noticed half-a-dozen Lawmasters were already parked outside.

"Guess someone decided to make a party of it," she commented to Lang. "Let's hope that means we've caught a break and they already have our perps in custody."

It was a vain hope, but it felt good to say it out loud. Having called back in to Control to confirm their arrival and check where the murder had been committed, as the two Psi-Judges stepped from the elevator onto the building's sixteenth floor a street Judge was already waiting for them.

"Good to see you," he said, holding a hand out in greeting. "The name's Dorden. The crime scene's this way."

He led them to an apartment at the end of the corridor, then inside to a spacious open plan living room. Passing through the hall and other rooms of the apartment along the way, Anderson saw dozens of Tri-D stills had been hung in pride of place on the walls. They were advertising images: beautiful women wearing bikinis in exotic holo-locations, drinking beer and canned soft drinks, or eating fast food with suggestively inviting smiles. When it came to hawking their products to the city's consumers, the Big Meg's advertising industry was hardly renowned for its subtlety.

"The victim's name was Charles Aron Mayzell," Dorden said as he led them to the body of a man lying dead on his back in the centre of the living room. It was clear the victim had been strangled and, as with the other killings, the words "Your sins will find you out" had been carved into his torso. "He was a Tri-D photographer. Advertising and fashion stuff, mostly. He was murdered fifty-three minutes ago."

"Fifty-three minutes?" Anderson raised an enquiring eyebrow. "I know modern med-technology is supposed to be a marvel. But that seems one hell of a precise time of death."

"Medicine doesn't come into it," Dorden said. He pointed down to a comms-headset lying broken on the floor beside the body. "The victim was in the middle of an audio-call when the perps attacked him. When she heard what was going on, the caller on the other end dialled the Sector House and reported a crime in progress. Unfortunately, with manpower diverted to the ongoing raids as part of Operation Lazarus, street patrol is currently short-staffed. By the time I got here, it was twenty-five minutes later and the perps had got away."

"Twenty-five minutes? They could have still been inside the building..."

"Way ahead of you," Dorden nodded. "I called for backup ASAP. The grille cover for the air-conditioning unit in one of the other rooms has been torn away. It's obvious that's how the perps entered the apartment. Right now, a couple of Teks are running a remote surveillance drone through the AC vents to see if they can pick up the perps' trail. I've also got another three street Judges checking the access points into the system, and Control is contacting all the block residents via vid-phone to see if anybody heard or saw anything suspicious." He pursed his lips grimly. "So far, though, we

haven't found them. Either these two perps are the luckiest sons-of-bitches alive, or they're drokking invisible."

"You've warned the Teks and the street Judges to be careful?" Anderson asked. "These perps have killed three people already, and at least one of them is probably superhuman."

"Don't worry." If Dorden felt aggrieved to have a Psi-Judge tell him his business, he gave no sign of it. "It's been done. They all have orders to report back immediately and call for backup if they find anything." He gestured at the dead man. "You only need to take a look at this guy to see these perps ain't taking any prisoners. In the meantime, though, I figured you'd want to have a look at things while the crime scene was still fresh. Also, I've got something you'll probably want to hear."

Opening one of the pouches on his utility belt, Dorden pulled out a miniature digital audio-recorder and held it up before them.

"We've got one of your perps on digi-tape," he said. "Chandra Lockhart, the woman who was on the other end of the line with Mayzell when he was attacked, works as a booker for a modelling agency. The agency records all calls as a matter of course. Apparently, when she realised what was happening, Lockhart used her vid-phone to call the Sector House instead of the audio-line she was talking to Mayzell on. Her audio-line captured the beginning of the attack and the Teks got the agency to send us the call recording via webmail. This is what it sounds like..."

He hit the play button, boosting the volume so the Psi-Judges could hear it clearly. At first, there were two voices. A man and a woman were arguing.

"That's Mayzell and Lockhart," Dorden said, supplying commentary as the argument continued. "There was a model supposed to be coming to Mayzell's apartment for a shoot this morning and she was running late." He cocked his head towards the recorder. "Wait... yeah, this is it. Listen. The perps must have sneaked up on Mayzell while he was still talking..."

There was a pause in the argument, before the man's voice spoke on the recording in a hoarse whisper.

"Chandra? Uh... I think I'm going to have to call you back..."

There was a muffled cry, and the sounds of a struggle. Then, a child's voice could be heard clearly, the tone shrill and vengeful.

"Kill him, Leonard!" the boy's voice shrieked. "He's one of the bad men! He's one of the men who hurt me! Kill him! Kill him, Leonard! Now!"

Abruptly, there was a crunching noise and a wail of feedback. Then, the recording fell silent.

"That's all that was on the tape." Dorden handed the recorder to Anderson. "As close as we can tell, Mayzell's headset must have fallen off during the struggle." He pointed at the damaged comm-set beside the body. "Then, somebody trod on it and broke the connection."

"Still, it confirms what a witness told us at the first homicide," Anderson said. Accepting the recorder from Dorden, she placed it in one of the pouches on her own belt. "One of the perps is a child. And now we know the name of the other one. The giant's name is Leonard."

"You've got more than just his name," Dorden said. He went to his belt again, in a gesture that reminded Anderson incongruously of a sleight-of-hand magician about to pull a stuffed rabbit from his hat. Taking a folded square of paper from another pouch, he opened it out and handed it to her. "Now, we even know what this Leonard looks like. It ain't a pretty picture."

It was a 2-D photo-scan on glossy paper, its grainy texture and flattened angles indicating it had been forensically enhanced and re-configured from a Tri-D photo. It showed a close-up of the snarling face of a mutant, seen from a strangely askew downward angle, his features illuminated in the light of a photo-flash. The mutant's skin was grey and leathery, his face disfigured by a series of bony ridges, his nose a strange leaf-shaped thing with a broad, deep crevice at its centre. But for the long greasy hair that hung down from his head, the mutant's face might have put Anderson in mind of some kind of giant bat.

"You're right," Anderson said, as she passed the photo-scan to Lang. "With a face like that he wouldn't win any beauty contests. How did you get this?"

"When I entered the scene I found a Tri-D camera lying on the floor alongside the comm-set," Dorden told her. "When I gave it to the Teks for analysis, one of them found a picture in the camera's memory. The time-stamp indicates it was taken at the time of the attack. Best I can figure it, Mayzell was probably already holding the camera when the perps attacked him. Maybe he tried to use the camera-flash to ward them off, or he just pressed the activation button by accident. Either way, he caught the mutant on camera. Extraordinary, I know. But it can be like that with investigations. Sometimes, you just catch a lucky break."

"Don't I know it." As Lang passed the photo-scan back to her, Anderson stared down at the image again as though trying to read some portent in the lines of the mutant's face. "All right, so we've got audio on one perp and a visual on the other one." She looked back up at Dorden with a sardonic half-smile. "I don't suppose you managed to find their driving licences and social security numbers while you were at it? Or maybe just their addresses? You know, anything to make our jobs really easy."

"Sorry," Dorden gave her a grim but good-natured smile in return. "Can't help you there."

"Have you thought maybe this helps explain some things?" Lang said to Anderson. "We were wondering why the victims saw the killers as one corporate being. Take a look at the mutant, though. Guy's so ugly, he must have scared them half to death when they saw him - never mind the fact he then started strangling them. Maybe that's why the victims always put the boy's face on the mutant's body. Maybe their minds were trying to blot out the thing that frightened them, even as they died."

"It could be." Far from convinced by Lang's theory, Anderson gave a noncommittal shrug. "I'll admit, I wouldn't like to run into Leonard here in any dark hallways. But I get the impression there's a lot more going on here than we realised. I don't know what it is yet, but there's something here we're just not seeing."

"Another hunch?" Lang asked.

"I suppose you could call it that," Anderson said. "We're Psi-Judges. Sometimes, bizarre and unexplained hunches just go with the territory. I'll say one thing, though. The words the boy said while the giant was killing Charles Mayzell confirm that there's a personal motive behind these killings. You heard what he said about Mayzell. 'He's one of the men who hurt me'."

"I heard it," Lang said. She stared for a moment at the body of the dead man, reading aloud the message written on his torso. 'Your sins will find you out'. The question is, what were the victims' sins? And what did they do to the boy to hurt him? We already established that we thought Joseph Kapinski was an innocent who wouldn't hurt a fly. What could he have done to the boy to make him want to kill him? What could any of them have done for that matter?"

"I don't know. But the perps' motives are the key to this whole case, I'm sure of it." Anderson sighed and rubbed her eyes tiredly. "Grud, even with

this new evidence, it still feels like we're chasing our tails. Give me a simple purse-snatcher over a serial killer any day. At least then, there's a motive you can understand."

Anderson shook her head as though to clear it, before she continued.

"Anyway, enough theorising," she said. "I think we'd be better adopting a practical approach. Our next step is to psi-scan Mayzell's body and see if it gives us any more leads." She turned to Dorden. "Meanwhile, can you forward a copy of the picture of our perp to Control? Ask them to release it to the news media with the announcement that it's the face of a suspect wanted for questioning in three murders. Have them give the media the names of the victims as well. Maybe if we start to make things hot for our giant, he'll be forced to reveal himself in some way or he'll make a mistake that will lead us to him."

"You think that will work?" Dorden asked her. "After all, we're not talking about a citizen here. The guy's a mutant. If he's living in the Big Meg, he's used to staying underground and keeping out of sight."

"It's a long shot, I'll admit," Anderson said. "But it comes back to the fact that we've got a boy and giant working hand-in-hand to commit a series of murders. That's an unusual combo, even by Big Meg standards. And, with a face like the giant's got, there's no way you'd forget him after you saw him. No matter how good they are at keeping out of the limelight, they need food and shelter just like everybody else. The chances are, they have somebody helping them. It's hard to stay hidden in a city of four hundred million people, never mind when you look like an escapee from an old-time freak show.

"Somebody, somewhere, must know what they are about."

FOURTEEN

MOTHER STANDS FOR COMFORT

I: The William Gull Memorial Med-Centre, Mega-City One, 2102

"I realise this is bad news," the doctor said as he looked at the young woman seated on the other side of his desk. "But you have to understand that no one will think any worse of you because of it. Sometimes, these things just happen. I wish we could prevent them. But what with all the radiation left over from the war..." He paused and shook his head sadly. "Really, there's nothing we can do."

"It must be a mistake," the woman said. She seemed dulled by grief, as though the news he had delivered had robbed her of feeling. Only her fingers, picking fretfully at the thin white smock she had worn during the examination, betrayed her agitation. "There's been a mix-up at the lab. This can't be right..."

"It's all done by computer," the doctor shook his head again. "And there are safeguards built into the system. The results have been checked and re-checked a half-dozen times. There's no mistake."

"But there must be," the woman protested. "You have to check the results again. There's nothing like this in my family. And my husband Leonard, he was normal."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "I know this all must come as a shock, but you just have to accept it. Honestly, we see this all time. Heredity is no guide in these matters. There's nothing unusual about two perfectly healthy parents conceiving a mutant." His eyes strayed briefly to the screen of the computer on his desk as he skimmed through her records. "Now, am I right in thinking your husband is no longer with us?"

"He was a geotherm technician," the woman muttered. She had bowed her head and, though he could no longer see her eyes, from the tone of her voice the doctor was sure she had started crying. "He was killed in the terrorist attack on the Power Tower, two months ago."

"Yes, of course, I read about it in the news-zines," the doctor nodded sagely and tutted in sympathy. "I'm sure right now it must seem like your world has turned upside down. First, your husband's death. Then, this. It's terrible, I know."

There was a box of tissues on his desk, intended for use by his patients. As the woman began to sob quietly in her chair, the doctor slid the box towards the edge of the desk until it was within her reach.

"I could arrange for you to see a bereavement counsellor," he said. "Actually, it's mandatory in these cases anyway. You can make an appointment now if you'd like, along with the appointment for the termination."

"Termination?" The words cutting through the fog of her grief, the woman gave a start and raised her head to look back at the doctor. "You want me to have an abortion?"

"That's mandatory too, I'm afraid," the doctor said. As he returned his attention to his computer screen and began to type on the keyboard, he gave the impression their consultation had dragged on too long and he was eager to end it. "It's the law. Under the Genetic Purity Act, when a pre-natal gene-scan indicates evidence of foetal mutation, termination is the only option." He shrugged his shoulders and gazed towards her in sympathy once more. "I know it seems harsh. But it's the price we have to pay for genetic stability. The incidence of mutation has been increasing ever since the Great Atom War ended. If we let things go unchecked, it would only be a matter of time before there would be as many mutants in the city as there are in the Cursed Earth. And no one wants that."

"But there has to be another way... You can't just kill my baby..."

"I'm sorry," the doctor said. "But the law is very clear in these matters. I suppose, strictly speaking, you could choose to go into voluntary exile in the Cursed Earth rather than comply. But, really, that's hardly an option. A normal person would be lucky to last a week in that rad-infested hellhole, never mind a woman in your condition. I wish there was another alternative. But, realistically, you have no choice other than to terminate the pregnancy."

For a moment they sat there in silence as the doctor gave the woman time to let his words to sink in. Then, checking his wristwatch as though he was late for an appointment elsewhere, he spoke again.

"Listen, I realise this is a lot to handle. Why don't I leave you alone for a few minutes here while you think it all through?" He rose from his chair, and began to head towards the door.

"Is it a boy or girl?" the woman asked, her voice calling out to him as he reached the door and opened it.

"I... I don't really see how that can help things," the doctor said. Caught half in-between his office and the corridor outside, he seemed ill at ease as he turned back towards her. "You have to remember we're talking about a ball of foetal tissue no bigger than your fingernail. To talk about its potential gender at this stage is hardly relevant..."

"Please," the woman said. She looked up at him with sorrowful eyes, tears running through her mascara to stain her cheeks. "I just to need to know. It will make things easier. Please."

"It's a boy," the doctor replied. He shifted uneasily on the threshold, then left the room and closed the door behind him.

Again, there was silence. The woman sat in her chair, tears streaming, her head downcast. Finally, she put the palm of her hand flat across her belly.

"A boy," she said. The words were hushed and quiet, their tone reverential as though she was praying aloud to any god who would listen. "A baby boy."

"Leonard," she said. "I'll call him Leonard. Just like his father."

II: Apartment 39-B, Anne Frank Block, Mega-City One, 2103

"Hush now," she whispered softly to her baby. It was the middle of the night, and she had woken from sleep to the sound of his crying. She crooned to him, gently cradling him in her arms as she sat beside his crib in the apartment's single bedroom. "Hush now, Leonard. You are my special little boy. Hush now, and let momma rock you back to sleep."

She would not let them kill her child. Sitting in the doctor's office after she had been told the news, she had realised the baby was all she had left of her husband. She was no saint, nor was she free of the prejudices so commonplace among her fellow citizens in Mega-City One. Like most people, she had always been sickened and horrified by mutants in equal measure. To be told her own child was a mutant, though, had made all the difference. She would not give him up. Something deep inside her had refused to concede to the doctor's blithe assurances it was all for the best. They had wanted to kill her baby. She would not allow it. Come what may, whatever hardships awaited her, she had known at once she would do everything in her power to protect her son.

In the year since she had made her decision, her life had changed beyond all recognition. She had been lucky in some respects. Grud knew that no

amount of money could compensate for the loss of her husband, but the death benefit from his life insurance policy had given her the funds to do what she needed. Liquidating her savings, she had asked around and made contact with an identity broker via an introduction from a friend of a friend. The broker had sold her a complete new identity: false papers, a driving licence, a new citizen ID number to allow her to claim social security and be granted an apartment by the Housing Department. She had moved to a different part of the city, discarding her birth name and her old life with the same finality with which she had abandoned all contact with her family and former friends. It was hard creating a new life from nothing, but she knew the doctor would be required to notify the Judges once she failed to attend the appointment to have her pregnancy aborted.

She was hunted; a fugitive from the inhuman decrees of Judges who had so lost sight of their own humanity they now cared little for concepts of pity or mercy. If she was a criminal, she was a criminal of conscience, compelled to break the law simply because the law was wrong. Still, at least in some regards, the odds were in her favour. The Judges were hardly likely to make it a priority to track her down. In a city with a population in the hundreds of millions, it was easier than most people thought for a person to simply disappear.

In the end, her greatest difficulties had been financial. First, there had been the cost of buying a new identity. Then, the expenses of finding a doctor who was willing to help deliver her baby without alerting the Judges to his birth. Together, they had used up her resources. Her savings and the money from her husband's insurance were gone: without the safety net of social security her new identity had brought her, she would have been destitute even without the added costs of raising a child. Social security paid her two hundred and ninety-nine credits a week. It was enough to sustain one person, but there were two of them and she could not risk trying to claim additional benefits on her son's behalf. His birth had never been registered: if she tried to claim social security for him it would have led the Judges right to them.

In its place, she was forced to live frugally. She lived in a tiny, poorly heated apartment in a cheap housing block in what was considered a bad neighbourhood. In everything, she put her son's welfare first. If money was tight in any given week, she neglected herself in favour of her child. She wore the same set of clothes until they were threadbare and little better than

rags. She owned only one pair of shoes, walking barefoot inside the apartment to avoid wearing them out. When times were hard, she even went without food. Anything to ensure her son Leonard received the best care she could give him. She had sacrificed so much for the boy already; it would not have been right to damn him by half-measures now.

If she had one fear, beyond the recurring nightmare that one day the Judges would come for them, it was that Leonard might fall ill. The doctor who had delivered the boy had made it clear he did not wish to see them again; yet, even if she could have found another doctor willing to deal with mutants, she would have been unable to afford any treatment. Thankfully, Leonard seemed strong and healthy. He seemed immune to the colds and sniffles that afflicted other infants, and given he had not been inoculated against the common childhood illnesses she could only hope he would prove immune to them as well.

At times, she worried about the effect their life might have on his development. Leonard had never been outside. He did not know what it was to feel sunlight on his face or breathe in clean fresh air. On those brief occasions when she left the apartment, she always went alone. Her son's appearance was distinctive. His skin was leathery and grey; bony ridges jutted from his forehead and across his cheeks; his nose was broad and oddly shaped, with an open fissure in its centre. No one could look at him without instantly realising he was a mutant. Wary of the consequences if someone saw him, she kept him inside the apartment, keeping the curtains on the windows closed at all times. It broke her heart to do it. It felt as though she was keeping her son a prisoner; as though he had committed some crime, when in fact the sins he suffered for were the sins of an uncaring world. Still, she had no choice. At least if there was one advantage to living in a bad neighbourhood it was that people tended to mind their own business.

Snug in the nook of her arms, Leonard had finally stopped crying. Careful not to wake him, she eased him gently back into the crib and pulled a blanket over him to keep him warm. Where others might recoil from him and see him as a monster, she looked down at her son and saw something different. In sleep, his face was so beautiful. Admittedly, Leonard took after neither of his parents when it came to his appearance, but she saw in him the continuation of all that had been good in his father. The continuation of

all, she hoped, that was good within her. Others might hate him and call him a mutant, but to her Leonard would always be her perfect, special angel.

In his crib Leonard stirred briefly in his sleep as though he was dreaming. She found herself wishing it would be within her power to see to it that all his dreams came true. The future lay before them both, its pathways obscure and uncertain, but she reiterated the promise she had made to herself that day in the doctor's office when she had named him. She would live and breathe to protect him, giving freely of her own life if need be to ensure no harm would befall him. If called upon she would sacrifice everything to keep him safe. She had already sacrificed her old life; her family; her name. She had given up so much, but the well of her love would never run dry. He was her son, and until the day she died he would be her first thought in the morning and her last thought at night. Her love for him transcended every boundary. It was locked within her heart forever; written fiercely in every fibre of her being; imprinted into her soul. Again, she promised herself she would never let them take him from her. It felt like a prayer.

She could only hope someone was listening.

III: Apartment 39-B, Anne Frank Block, Mega-City One, 2106

She was asleep when they kicked in her door.

Hearing the sound, she had awoken from sleep with a start. A thousand frantic thoughts whirled within her mind, but one lay paramount above the rest. A thought that brought with it a chill to her heart.

The Judges had found them.

"Grace Truli, you are under arrest!" Someone shone a flashlight into her face, blinding her. A woman's voice barked out orders. "Don't move! Keep your hands where I can see them!"

Grace Truli. They knew her name. Her real name. She felt a sinking feeling of despair as the last of her desperate hopes was extinguished. This was no random crime swoop or case of mistaken identity. They knew exactly who they were looking for. They had come to take Leonard away.

"Where's the mutie, Truli?" the woman's voice said. "Give him up now and maybe we'll go easy on you."

"I found him," she heard another voice call out. A male Judge. "Grud, but he's one ugly little drokker."

Still blinded by the beam of the flashlight, she heard the clump of the male Judge's boots as he moved towards Leonard's bed. Frightened, Leonard was crying. Then, as the Judge grabbed him, she heard her son call to her.

"Momma!"

"Leave him alone!" Her mother's instincts outweighing her fear of the Judges, she leapt from the bed towards them. "He's my son! You can't take him away-"

Someone hit her with a daystick. Then, everything went black.

IV: Mutant Detention Area 21, The West Wall, Mega-City One, 2106

"Let me see if I got this right," the mutant said. His face looked normal, but he had a series of gill-like wattles either side of his neck that opened and closed in time with his breathing. "You're saying you want to give me a child?"

"Think of it as an adoption," Judge Isabel Ruiz replied. She gazed back at him coolly, trying hard not to be distracted by the distaste she felt at the creature's deformities. "The kid's a mutie and the Law says he has to be deported to the Cursed Earth with the rest of you. But he's three and a half years old. He wouldn't last an hour alone out there. He needs someone to look out for him."

They were standing by the holding pens, where mutie wall-hoppers caught trying to cross the West Wall into the city were held in temporary detention pending deportation back to the Cursed Earth. As she stood talking to the mutant outside the pens, Ruiz could feel thousands of eyes sullenly glaring at her from the detainees on the other side of the las-mesh fence. It was raining slightly, and she could hear the tiny droplets of water sizzle as they hit the mesh.

"Why me?" the mutant asked. His expression indicated the question was born of curiosity rather than belligerence, but Ruiz experienced a brief sensation of annoyance all the same. She wanted the interview to be over. She had always been sickened by the sight of mutants; to be standing close to so many of them was enough to make her feel queasy.

"I talked to the guards on Wall Watch," Ruiz told him. "They say you came over the wall with a woman. The kid needs parents. You seemed to fit the bill."

"You picked me just 'cause I got a wife?" The mutant raised an eyebrow. "Glad to see you put so much thought into this, Judge. Wouldn't want you going off half-cocked, after all, handing the kid over to the first mutant you saw that you didn't think might eat him." As the mutant shook his head in disbelief, Ruiz heard a whistling noise come from his neck wattles. "Hnn. You Judges sure do take the biscuit. First, you halfway beat the crap outta me and the wife 'cause we tried to cross into the city. Then, you pen us up like we was animals. Now, you want we should take this boy just so it don't have to trouble your conscience when you kick him out into the wastelands. Yup, I've know some sorry sons-a-bitches. But, beat me like a rad-mule if you ain't the sorriest one I ever met by a good Cursed Earth mile."

"You want another taste of daystick, mutie?" As Ruiz's hand went to the handle of the slim club held in her belt loop, she spat the last word out like a curse. "If so, just keep on talking the way you have been. Now, if you're finished with the speeches, I'm still waiting for an answer to my original question. Are you going to take the kid?"

A handful of seconds passed in silence as the mutant stood watching her. Despite her threat, he did not drop his eyes or avoid her gaze. Instead, he stared at her with what might almost have been a look of sadness. It made her feel uncomfortable. It was as though the mutant had judged her somehow, and now found her only worthy of pity.

"I have to ask the missus," the mutant said finally, breaking the silence. He nodded towards the pens, where a woman with three arms stood among the other mutants crowded up against the mesh. "But, so long as she ain't against it, I guess we'll take him. I wouldn't be right, leaving a kid to die in the Cursed Earth."

V: The Peterson Farm, The Cursed Earth, 2118

It had been a long, hard day; a day little different from the thousands of others he had experienced before it. Rising from bed just before dawn, Leonard had joined Pa Peterson and the twins - Billy and Zeke - in working the fields. It had been a day spent in back-breaking labour; shouldering between them the heavy burdens that came with trying to farm the thin, arid soils of the Cursed Earth. They worked well together: Billy and Zeke were Pa's real sons while Leonard was only adopted, but Pa treated them all equally. As a family they had gone into the fields, and as a family they

returned - exhausted after a day spent tending crops in a place where, at times, it seemed as though nature was always against them. Whether in the shape of drought or locusts, dust storms or blight, some new hardship lurked around every corner. In the Cursed Earth, the hardships never truly ended.

Now, his chores behind him, Leonard sat on the ramshackle porch out in front of the Peterson homestead. It was sunset. In the west, the sun was falling slowly towards the horizon. The sky was painted in shades of burning crimson and flaring scarlet. It was a beautiful sight. But, as ever when night-time approached, Leonard's eyes inevitably turned to the east.

"Leonard?" He heard Pa Peterson's voice as the door to the farmhouse opened behind him. "Dinner's nearly ready. Ma said to make sure you washed up." Stepping out onto the porch, Pa looked down at Leonard in concern. "Are you all right, son? You seem kind of sad?"

"I'm fine, Pa," Leonard answered. His eyes did not waver from the eastern horizon. There was a mountain range off in the distance, blocking his line of sight: he stared at it as though he hoped to wear the mountains down in time so as to reveal the landscape hidden beyond them. "I'm just taking a breather. That's all."

"A breather, huh?" Setting himself down on the porch, Pa sat beside him. "That's how come you sit here every night, looking toward them mountains? Don't take no genius to see what's on your mind, son. East is the direction to the city. You're thinking about your momma, ain't you? Your real momma, I mean."

"I miss her, Pa," Leonard said, shifting uneasily on the porch as he struggled to put his thoughts into words. "I know you and Ma Peterson have been good to me. But I miss her. I miss my mother."

"Sure you do," Pa's voice was gentle. "There ain't no shame in that. You know me and the missus have raised you as our own, but we don't take no offence that you miss your real momma. She's your blood kin. Your flesh and blood. Stands to reason you'd want to see her. But I'm guessing there's more than just that in your head, Leonard. I'm right, ain't I?"

"Yeah." Leonard shifted awkwardly again. This was something he had been considering for months, but it seemed almost wrong to say it out loud. It was like he was being ungrateful to the Petersons after all they had done for him. "I've been thinking about going to the city. I was thinking, if I went there, maybe I could find her."

"Hnn. I figured it was something like that," Pa said, nodding his head slowly. Scratching distractedly at the wattles on his neck, he fell silent for a moment as Leonard waited anxiously for his reaction. Until, his face deep in thought as though he was choosing his words carefully, Pa spoke once more.

"You know what folks mean when they talk about looking for a needle in a haystack?" he said. Seeing Leonard nod his head, he continued. "Well, looking for your momma in the city would be like that, son. 'Cept, the haystack would be bigger than those mountains over there if you was standing right by 'em. The city's an awful big place, Leonard. And we don't even know what your momma's name is. The Judge who gave you to us, she never told us. You remember we talked about all this before?"

"I remember, Pa," Leonard replied. Crestfallen, he lowered his head, his eyes downcast as he stared into the dirt at his feet.

"And that ain't all there is to it, either," Pa said. "City folk ain't like us, Leonard. Granted, some of 'em must be all right, but for the most part they're meaner than Gila Munjas, the whole lot of 'em. And they don't like mutants - me and the missus got a taste of that when we got caught trying to sneak in over the wall. The Big Meg ain't kind to mutants, Leonard. Now, I ain't saying you can't look after yourself. Lord knows, you're already taller than most full-grown men and you ain't even stopped growing yet. You got a lot going for you. You're strong, and you don't hurt easy. You can hunt and track better than I could at your age. Hell, you can even see in the dark. But, the problem is, none of them things are likely to count for much if you go to the city. The city ain't like the Cursed Earth, Leonard. Living there is a whole different bucket of worms. And - much as it pains me to say it, son - I don't reckon you got what it takes to get by in the city on your own."

"It's because I'm dumb," Leonard said, miserably. "I know I'm not smart like you and Ma and Billy and Zeke..."

"You ain't dumb, Leonard," Pa said. "Don't you ever let anybody tell you that. You just take a mite longer to think things through than most people do. There's plenty of worse afflictions a man could have. But, if you ever went to the city, there'd be folks there that would try to take advantage of it. You're good-natured, Leonard. You tend to believe folks when they tell you stuff. But that ain't no way to be going about things in the city. There, you got to assume that everybody's a liar. And I don't think you're made to see things that way. You understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes, Pa," Leonard said. Inside, it felt like his heart was breaking, but he tried to keep it from his face. He knew Pa was only looking out for his best interests, the same way he always did. "I understand."

"Good." Pa looked at him for long moments as though trying to read Leonard's thoughts in the lines of his face. Then, patting his adopted son on the shoulder, he tried to make him feel better. "Maybe it won't always be that way, Leonard. It could be your body's been doing all the growing so far, and maybe your brain just needs to catch up some. Give it time, and maybe you'll learn to see the world the way it is rather than the way you'd like it to be. Me and Ma have always known there'd come a time when you wanted to set out on your own. I'm not saying you can't ever go to the city. All I'm saying is maybe you should wait a little while longer."

"Yes, Pa." Leonard nodded; the dutiful son. "I'll do what you told me. I'll wait.

"I'll wait a little while longer."

VI: The Peterson Farm, The Cursed Earth, 2125

The moment Leonard saw the smoke rising in the distance, he knew there was trouble. The harvest had been bad and he was out hunting on his own in the wastelands; trying to supplement the family's meagre food supplies by stalking a pair of wild rad-boars whose tracks he had spotted earlier. Glancing back in the direction of the farm he had seen a thick column of black smoke hanging menacingly in the air, its origin obscured by the contours of the intervening terrain. The hunt forgotten, Leonard had run back to the farmhouse as fast as his legs would carry him.

He was too late. The homestead was burning. Advancing cautiously into a scene of carnage, he found Pa and his brothers lying dead on the ground, their bodies riddled with gunshots. Ma Peterson had been violated and left to rot beside the barn with her head split nearly in half. The barn doors were busted open; the stores of winter grain inside it had been picked clean.

Raiders. The realisation hit him as he stood looking down in mute horror at the bodies of his family. A gang of bandits had come to steal food and they had killed the Petersons when they tried to resist them. It was a scenario that played out endlessly in the Cursed Earth; there were always predators prowling the wastes, looking for a soft target and an easy meal. Leonard felt a fierce and burning anger suddenly rise up within him.

"Looks like we missed one." He heard a harsh voice behind him. Turning, Leonard found himself facing half a dozen men with guns. They were mutants. Their leader, a powerfully built figure with a misshapen skull and a white badger stripe in his hair, looked at him and smiled with a mouth full of sharpened teeth. "He's a big 'un, too. You gotta figure he's worth at least a couple of days' good eatin'."

For the remainder of his life, Leonard would never know what happened then. The next thing he knew, he was standing over the bandits' leader. The man's chest had a fist-sized hole punched through it and his heart had been pulled from his body. There was blood on Leonard's hands and the bodies of the rest of the raiders lay sprawled around him. Their necks were broken, or their faces had been reduced to ugly masks of raw meat by the impact of blows that had caved in their skulls. It was clear to Leonard he had killed them, but there was not even the slightest memory of their deaths to trouble his mind: it had all been lost in the momentary blood-haze of the rage that had descended on him when he saw the Petersons had been murdered. In the aftermath, his rage having been spent on the bandits, he felt strangely cold inside. He figured that was what it must feel like when your heart was broken.

It was an hour or more before he started crying. By then he had buried the Petersons, collecting their bodies and performing their burials with as much reverence as possible, given the circumstance. He buried them together; four graves in a line with roughly-made crosses of wood and twine to serve as markers. Leonard had never learned to write, so the markers were blank. Instead, he stood by each of the graves in turn and said goodbye with a prayer.

He left the bandits' bodies where they had fallen, for the scavengers to have their way with them when the smell of blood drew them to the farm. Following the bandits' tracks, he found the place where they had stashed the food they had stolen during the raid. It began to rain, like tears from heaven; the rainfall dousing the flames of the burning farmhouse down to a smouldering, blackened ruin. It had taken no great deal of thought from Leonard to decide what he would do next: the death of the Petersons had severed his only connection to the Cursed Earth.

By the time the sun set on the farmhouse that day, he was already far away. He had headed east, towards the city.

VII: City Bottom, Mega-City One, 2126

It was midday in City Bottom. Emerging from a sewer hatchway as he and Daniel returned home following their latest killings, Leonard gazed cautiously at the landscape about them as he stepped out into the open. The fact the sun was high overhead, blazing brightly in a clear and cloudless sky, made little difference when you got down to the Bottom. Cast into permanent shadow by the interweaving network of elevated roadways and the huge foundation blocks of the mega-city above it, by day City Bottom existed in a state of perpetual twilight. A grey half-light suffused their surroundings, emphasising the desolation of empty streets and garbage-strewn vacant lots. Still, it was daytime. And, no matter how deep the shadows around them, the sun was every mutant's enemy.

It had not always been that way. Back in the Cursed Earth, when Leonard had lived with the Petersons, the sun had been an ally. It had made the crops grow. It had warmed the farmhouse in winter. Even though Leonard could see in all but the deepest darkness, he had always preferred to work by the light of day. In City Bottom, though, the hours of daylight were a time for caution. In Mega-City One, so long as the sun was in the sky, every mutant lived in fear.

Like so much else since Leonard had come to the city, it was Freddie Binns who had explained it to him. Freddie had explained the Judges had all kinds of different machines to help them catch mutants. They had machines that could see in the dark; machines that could read heatsign or track by scent; even machines that could hear a man's heart beating in his chest. "Whatever else happens, you make sure you don't get caught out in daylight, Leonard," Freddie had told him. "A guy like you tends to stand out in the crowd; any Judge would only have to take one look at you to see you are a mutie. If things go wrong and you do find yourself out in daylight, make sure you stay out of sight. Whatever else happens, make sure you don't lead the Judges back to the hostel or the warehouse. If that happens, they'll raid the place and send every last one of you back to the Cursed Earth."

Mindful of Freddie's warnings, as Leonard slipped back to the hostel he took the long way round. He steered clear of the open spaces; hurrying from one piece of cover to the next, and doing his best to stay in the shadows. Daniel, though, had no such problems. Invisible to the world at large,

Daniel walked out in the open. Granted, he kept within Leonard's line of sight. But where Leonard move huddled and quietly through City Bottom, his eyes and ears alert for any sign of ambush, Daniel wandered childish and carefree among its gloomy deserted streets. For a time, Daniel watched Leonard's stealthy journey with interest. Then, growing bored, he paused here and there to gaze in fascination at the movements of insects or the squabbles of the rats skulking hidden in the buildings on every side of them. At times, apparently becoming impatient at the slow pace of their progress, the boy would begin to hop and skip for a while, playing some imaginary game only he was a party to. In those moments, it was as though the boy had undergone some subtle transformation. As though the satisfaction that came in the wake of the latest examples of his vengeance had fleetingly lifted the weight of bitterness from the boy's shoulders; briefly allowing him to act like the child he was.

It was a transformation Leonard had seen before. Every instant of suffering inflicted on those whom Daniel called "the bad men" seemed to buy the boy an instant of respite from his anger. Sadly, Leonard knew it would not last. In time, Daniel's good mood would fade. Soon enough, all his familiar hatreds would re-assert themselves and he would begin to badger Leonard to kill again. For the moment, though, it was good to see the boy so happy.

Finally, they drew within sight of the hostel. Leonard felt a sensation of relief. He was tired, and though the hostel was not much to look at, it was the only home they had. He felt his bed calling to him; after all his exertions throughout the night and the morning, he wanted nothing more than to get some sleep.

C'mon, Leonard, Daniel said. Now they were close to home, the boy seemed possessed by a sudden breathless excitement. *C'mon, I'll race you! Last one to your room is a pack of rotten synthi-egg!*

Laughing, Daniel began to run toward the hostel while Leonard followed slowly and more cautiously in his wake. Even as the boy sprinted away, Leonard felt moved to see his friend acting so much like a child. It would not last, but for a few moments at least it was as though they had put all the bad things behind them. It felt as though they had earned a few precious moments away from the killings. A few moments without the pressure and the demands of Daniel's vengeance. A few moments when they could both glory in the pleasure of simply being alive. Watching the boy as he ran to

the hostel, Leonard was put in mind of the best moments of his own childhood: those times when the hardships and difficulties of surviving in the Cursed Earth had briefly been forgotten and pushed aside by a moment of laughter, or happiness, or warmth he had shared with his family. He was put in mind of the days when he lived with the Petersons in an atmosphere of love and trust, before the raiders came and showed him how pitiless the world could be. It might only last a matter of hours, perhaps even only a few minutes, but he did not begrudge Daniel this brief re-awakening of his innocence. To Leonard's mind, a little innocence was a good thing.

The terrible shame of it was the world had so many ways to destroy the innocence of children.

FIFTEEN

CHILDREN OF THE SECRET

"Well, that didn't tell us anything new," Anderson said as she shook her head to clear it. She turned to Lang. "I take it you saw the same things I did? It was exactly like the other killings. The killer had the physical characteristics of the giant, but when the victim looked at him he saw him as a child."

"I saw it exactly the same way you did," Lang nodded. She frowned. "That's three times now that the victims have conflated the two perps into one collective being. I know earlier I suggested that it was probably the effect of the trauma scrambling their memories, but I think you were right to disagree. I mean, I could see it happening once or twice. But three times in the same investigation. It's too much of a coincidence. There has to be more to it. There's something going on here we're not seeing."

"Yeah, I agree," Anderson replied. She sighed. "Grud knows what it is, though."

Frustrated, Anderson fell into brooding silence. They had both performed psi-scans on Charles Mayzell's body, but so far it seemed they had little additional information to go on in their hunt for the killers. Admittedly, with the release of the photo-scan of the giant to the media, there was a small hope that some helpful citizen might recognise the picture once it went on the air and call in with further leads. In the meantime, though, the investigation seemed to be stuck in neutral. The photo-scan and the audio recording had confirmed the nature of the two perps they were hunting, but they did not bring them any closer to being able to track them down.

"Maybe we've been looking at this whole thing wrong from the very beginning," Lang said, her expression showing she was feeling the same frustration as Anderson. "Maybe there's only one perp, after all. He could be using holo-technology or some kind of psi-power to make the victims see him as a child."

"You're forgetting about the audio recording of the child's voice," Anderson told her. "We heard him say 'Kill him, Leonard'. If there was one perp it would mean he likes talking to himself."

"What about if he was suffering from some kind of multiple personality disorder?" Lang asked, only to abruptly shake her head. "No, forget it. I can

see the holes in that one myself. Genuine cases of MPD are as rare as dodo shit, even in Mega-City One. Besides, there's no evidence to support it in this case - either physical or psychic." She shrugged tiredly, then rubbed at her eyes. "Guess I'm just reaching. If only we could pick up the psychic vibrations of the perps themselves at the crime scene. Maybe then we'd have something more concrete to go on."

"From your mouth to Grud's ears," Anderson said. She noticed Lang was gazing at her strangely. "What is it? You're looking at me like I've got snot dangling and you're too embarrassed to tell me."

"It was just what you said," Lang replied. "'From your mouth to Grud's ears'. I didn't think you were the religious type?"

"I'm not," Anderson shook her head. "It's just an expression. It probably makes me sound ancient when I tell you this, but when I first came out of the Academy it was an expression a lot of the old-time Judges used back then. I guess it just stuck in my head."

"Yeah, well, no offence," Lang said, "but it's kind of hard to imagine you just out of the Academy. You seem too... polished to have ever been a rookie."

"Polished?" Anderson smiled. "I'm guessing that's the diplomatic way of saying 'old enough to be a dinosaur' these days. Don't let this 'polished' exterior fool you, though. I know what it's like to be a rookie. Everything you're going through now, I've been through myself."

For an instant, Anderson's eyes met Lang's as a moment of unspoken understanding passed between them. For the first time since they had been assigned to the case together, Anderson felt a connection to her fellow Psi-Judge as though Lang had briefly lowered her guard. All too soon, however, the moment was over.

"All right, so what next?" Lang said, turning away from Anderson as she resumed her normally reserved manner.

"Well, I guess we-" Anderson began, only for her words to be cut off by the sound of a voice over her radio.

"Sector House 45 Tek-Bay to Psi-Judge Anderson! Please respond!"

"Anderson here. What can we do for you, Tek-Bay?"

"This is Tek-Judge Longhurst, Anderson," the voice responded on the other end of the line. "And I think it's more a question of what I can do for you. I've been going through some of evidence collected at the Kapinski

crime scene. I think you'd better come down to Tek-Bay ASAP. There's something here you need to see."

"It's some kind of meme-encoding device," Longhurst said, pointing to a splayed collection of wires, transistors and other assorted pieces of electronics laid out on his workbench. "It was found inside one of the boxes at the Kapinski apartment, along with a number of data crystals containing information that had been recorded by the machine."

"Okay, allow me to be the one to show my ignorance," Anderson said as, around them, a dozen Tek-Judges worked on a variety of ongoing projects within the noisy confines of Tek-Bay. Having hurried to the Sector House with Lang in response to Longhurst's call, she found she was impatient to get to the heart of the matter as quickly as possible. "Laying all the techno-babble to one side for a moment, what's a meme-encoding device?"

"It's a kind of recording device," Longhurst said. He was old for a Judge, perhaps even in his sixties, and as he spoke his manner put Anderson in mind of a professor who had been called upon to explain matters to a rather dull and listless student.

"It all relates to the way the brain handles our memories," he continued. "We experience the world via a constant influx of data relayed by our senses, which is then processed by our brains. Naturally, during processing, the brain prioritises this data in accordance with its importance. Much of this sensory data is ephemeral and never reaches our conscious minds. However, in some situations, the entirety of the data received in an given moment will be recorded directly by our brains, creating a particularly vivid memory of that moment which we can then access later. Obviously, this takes up a lot of processing and storage space, so it's a task the brain performs relatively rarely. Usually, it is reserved for particularly important memories. Memories which, by their nature, are somehow central to who we are: whether they be good memories or bad, moments of joy or moments of terror, and so on. Now, for the purposes of this conversation, I'm calling these vivid memories by the name 'meme'. Though strictly speaking, of course, a meme is simply an idea or a bundle of related ideas. I suppose I could refer to them as 'engrams' instead, though that nomenclature is similarly not without its problems-"

"Let me see if I get this right," Anderson cut him off. "You're telling us this is a machine for recording memories?"

"Didn't I just say that?" Annoyed at the interruption, Longhurst stared at her peevishly for a moment, before returning his attention to the device on his workbench. "As I said, this machine was designed to encode memories, recording the entire sensory experience of the wearer on data crystals for ease of later playback. It's not unrelated to the technology we use in dream-machines these days, though if you consider when it was created it is truly remarkable. The inventor was a genius, really. Ahead of his time."

"It was made some time ago?" Anderson said, attempting to prompt the Tek-Judge into revealing his secrets more quickly. "When? And who made it?"

"Well, the last question is the easiest to answer," Longhurst replied. "The device was found with some of the effects of Kapinski's deceased father. It seems Kapinski Senior was an comp-engineer specialising in sensory interface technology. As to when he made it, given the age of some of the parts I'd say it's at least fifty years old. It looks like the meme-encoder was a pet project he was working on in his own time, partly funded by private backers. According to the Office of Patent Registration, there's no record that Kapinski Senior ever applied for patent protection for his invention. But then, considering what he was using it for, I suppose it's hardly surprising he didn't want anyone to know it existed."

"What kind of use are we talking about here?" Anderson asked. "Something illegal?"

"Illegal, yes. And, frankly, somewhat horrifying." An expression of disgust briefly passed across Longhurst's face. "I've managed to reconfigure some of the data on the crystals to a conventional Tri-D format to allow us to find out what kind of things Kapinski Senior was recording. I wouldn't even know where to begin if I tried to describe the content to you, so it's probably better if you see the playback for yourselves. I warn you, though, you'll need to have a strong stomach. I've seen a lot of things I'd rather forget since I became a Judge. But some of the images recorded on this machine made me wish I could have my brain wiped so I wouldn't have to remember them."

Afterwards, there was silence for a time. Even the other Teks working in Tek-Bay had fallen quiet. Anderson and Lang stood in wordless shock, while Longhurst fiddled distractedly with some of the electronic components littering his workbench. No one spoke. They were struck dumb

while their minds, like traitors, endlessly replayed the images they had just seen.

"What about the victims in the recordings?" It was Anderson, finally, who broke the silence. "Do we know who they are?"

"Some of them," Longhurst answered her. He still retained his professorial manner, but his earlier peevishness was gone; banished by his disquiet at the recordings. "I managed to extract some names and dates from the file headers on the data crystals." He paused. "The most startling discovery was that two of the victims in your ongoing homicide investigation - Joseph Kapinski and Charles Mayzell - were among the children who were abused in these recordings fifty years ago."

"You're sure of this?" Lang said. Once Longhurst had nodded, she continued in a tone of rising outrage. "So Kapinski Senior invented this machine and then used it to record himself abusing his own son?" She shook her head, her voice became more sober and reflective as she turned toward Anderson. "Grud, and Mayzell as well. You said these killings probably involved unfinished business. But how does Konrad Gruschenko tie in with all this?"

"What about it?" Anderson asked Longhurst. "Have you found anything here to indicate Gruschenko's involvement? He was too old to be one of the victims in these recordings. Could he have been one of the abusers?"

"It's impossible to say," Longhurst told her. "You have to understand the recordings were made from the point of view of the abusers, recording their memories of the experience. Once I've had a chance to further analyse them it may be possible to identify the perps - if they saw their own reflections in any kind of reflective surface, for example. But, for the moment, all I've got are the names of some of the victims."

"All right, then," Anderson said. "Compile a list of their names and forward it to MAC to find out their current status and addresses if they are still alive. Then, have Control contact all the living victims and have then brought in to protective custody. If anyone squawks about how much manpower that's going to take, tell them to come see me about it. It can't be a coincidence that two men who were assaulted as children as part of the same abuse ring have both been murdered in the last few hours. The remaining survivors from these recordings could be our killers' next potential victims."

"What I don't understand is why anyone would do this?" Lang said, after Longhurst had hurried away to contact MAC. The rookie's question seemed to be uttered in askance at the universe around her rather than aimed at Anderson directly. "I'm not talking about the fact that someone is killing the grown-up victims of a child abuse ring. I'm not even talking about the abuse itself - though, Grud knows, both of those crimes seem as incomprehensible to me as each other. What I don't understand is why would the perps who abused these kids make recordings of their crimes? I realise it may not be entirely germane to the case. But why would a perp make a record of something like that? They must have known if anyone ever found out what they had done, they'd be facing life in the cubes."

"The recordings are mementos," Anderson said quietly. Her face was dark. "What you need to understand about these kind of perps is that they don't think they are doing anything wrong. They're not stupid: they know it's illegal. But they think it's all perfectly natural. To their minds it is society that is wrong, not them. With that in mind, some of them will search out others of their own kind: to swap stories and trade mementos. Sometimes, they even trade kids between them. At the same time, they'll often experiment with new technology in an attempt to aid their activities. Think of any of the great inventions of the last few centuries - photography, the Megaweb, Tri-D - and probably within a week of them being invented there was somebody trying to use them to record and disseminate this type of material. It's the flipside of human ingenuity: the same brilliance of mind that allows us to go into outer space or cure diseases, also allows us to come up with new and better ways of perpetrating horror on each other. Science is neutral: the real problem comes from the people who use it."

"Earlier, I noticed something when we were watching the Tri-D transfers of the meme recordings," Lang said. She paused momentarily, as though uncertain whether she should broach the subject. "I don't mean to pry. But you seemed upset. Particularly so, I mean..."

In reply, Anderson at first said nothing. It was not so much that she was lost in her own thoughts, more that she was unsure how much she should share with the woman beside her. There were personal matters that weighed heavily on her mind. Thoughts of her childhood, of her own past history, had risen up like some vast leviathan from the depths and refused to leave her.

She could have told Lang the truth. Anderson could have told her that she had been abused by her own father as an infant. She could have told Lang that she had killed him, unknowingly using her powers for the first time to defend herself from him. She could have told her of how for years she had been unaware of that fact. In an attempt to protect her from the guilt at her act of patricide, members of Psi Division had taken it upon themselves to telepathically block off that part of her memory when she was a child. She had only re-discovered the memory a few years ago, and was still coming to terms with it. She could have told Lang all these things.

Instead, what she said was this.

"It's like what Longhurst was saying earlier," Anderson replied. "When you're a Judge you see a lot of things you wish you could forget. That was one of them."

SIXTEEN

WAITING FOR THE MOMENT

Night comes to the city. By the methods through which men once measured time it is now eight o'clock post-meridian. Twenty-zero-zero by the twenty-four hour clock used in Mega-City One. Another day is done. The sun is fallen as natural light gives way to the glow of neon.

It is only at night the city truly comes alive. Between the setting of the sun and the desperate early hours of morning, the city is a landscape of endless possibility. Its pulse quickens. In a hundred thousand bars and clubs, lonely citizens mingle together in search of connection. For eternal romantics, thrillseekers, social drinkers, criminals and would-be lovers, the best of life is now ahead of them. Of all the city, only the Judges curse the fall of night. For them, darkness brings a greater workload and an increase in danger.

Still, the night comes to all regardless. It brings its rewards, both good and bad, to those who entertain the possibilities of darkness. The thoroughfares of the city, its pedways and skedways and alleyways, are swelled as thousands of lost souls seek out the moments which they hope will give meaning to their existence. Their lives intersect, briefly converge, and then move apart. In this city, everyone is searching for something. Everyone is waiting, whether or not they know it. Waiting for their luck to turn. Waiting for the Fates to smile. Waiting for the universe to pay them what they are owed.

Waiting for the moments that will change their lives.

For Leonard, the moment came while he was waiting for someone else.

We should go, Daniel said to him. *It's obvious he's not coming. You can see that, can't you?*

We'll give him a little while longer, Leonard replied. *He said he'd be here tonight. And Freddie's never been late before.*

It was night in City Bottom, and Leonard was waiting with the rest of the mutants under cover of the old carport at the side of the hostel. They were waiting for Freddie Binns. Freddie brought his van down into City Bottom at the same time every night, to pick up the mutants and ferry them to wherever they were supposed to be working that night. Tonight, though,

Freddie was late. Really late. Over an hour had passed and there had been no sign of him.

He's not coming, Daniel said. *We're wasting time here. We should go up into the city and punish some more of the bad men. We shouldn't be waiting here for somebody who's never going to turn up. It's boring. And remember your promise. You said you'd help me kill the bad men*.

I remember, Daniel, Leonard said. *But this is my job and I need to eat. I need money. We'll wait a little while longer. I'm sure Freddie will be along soon. Then, we'll kill some of the bad men later. I promise*.

It had been the same for the last hour. As they waited fruitlessly with the other mutants for Freddie's arrival, Daniel had kept up a constant refrain of complaints and entreaties inside Leonard's head. At times, worn down by Daniel's voice, it felt to Leonard as though his head was going to burst. The boy would not let it go: his good mood of a few hours earlier was gone and now all the boy lived for was vengeance. Still, wary of the consequences if he was not there when Freddie finally arrived, Leonard had tried to resist the little boy's will.

I don't want to wait, Daniel said. As the boy's impatience grew, his voice became shriller. *I shouldn't have to! You promised me! I want to kill more bad men. I want to kill them now!*

Every time Daniel spoke, his voice grew louder. To Leonard, it felt like the boy's voice was no longer just inside his head. Instead, the voice had seemed to grow so huge it was all around him. It was a rare thing for him to refuse to accede to Daniel's demands immediately, and he was beginning to regret it. Already, looking about him, he saw that some of the other mutants had begun to drift away. Dispirited, apparently convinced that Freddie wasn't coming, they had started to return to the hostel, grumbling and muttering amongst themselves. Soon, Leonard was the only one left.

All right, he said at last. *I'll do what you want, Daniel. We'll go into the city. And we'll kill some more bad men*.

For Nathan Prendergast, the moment came as he went about his duties in Roderick Lowe's apartment.

He heard the buzz of a comms-terminal, indicating an incoming call on one of the secure encrypted lines to the apartment. Checking the call signature as he went to answer it, Prendergast recognised it at once.

"So, Arkady," he said, as the call connected and the image of the Russian mobster appeared on-screen. "To what do we owe this singular pleasure?"

"We have your donor," Arkady answered. "He's healthy, with an excellent medical history, and the gene-scan indicates there shouldn't be any rejection problems. He's en route to the hospital now."

"Excellent," Prendergast said. "I'm sure Mr Lowe will be thrilled when I tell him the news. I take it, as per our agreement, the donor is already brain-dead?"

"He will be by the time he reaches the hospital." Arkady's face as he spoke was so unreadable it might as well have been set in stone. "We hired a compliant telepath to ensure there will be no damage to the neuro-pathways when the donor's brain activity is neutralised. Be assured, he's exactly everything you asked for. The medical paperwork has been altered to make it appear he suffered a fatal brain haemorrhage. Mr Lowe will have a clean body. Even if the Judges decide to sniff around it, there will be nothing to suggest the donor died of anything other than natural causes."

"Good," Prendergast nodded with businesslike brusqueness. "Now, there is another matter. Mr Lowe instructed me to perform a routine security sweep after you relayed the news of Gruschenko's death. Our sources in the Justice Department indicate Gruschenko's killer claimed two more victims this morning. Their names are not important. However, it seems they were both relatives of some of Mr Lowe's past associates."

"You think Konrad's death may relate to some form of vendetta against Mr Lowe or his partners?" Arkady asked. "May I ask what was the nature of his association with the men in question?"

"You may not," Prendergast replied. "It could be the matter is entirely a coincidence. All the same, Mr Lowe is rightly concerned about his own security. I take it, as is common in your circles, you have initiated steps to ensure Gruschenko's assassin is punished?"

"A one-hundred-thousand credit bounty," Arkady grunted. "It is only a matter of time before someone tells us his name. When they do, we will take care of it."

"Again, excellent," Prendergast purred. "In the meantime, just to be on the safe side, I have taken the opportunity to beef up Mr Lowe's security."

"You want I should send some of my men to act as bodyguards?" Arkady said. "They could cover him at the hospital, during the operation, when he

is at his most vulnerable. Say the word, and I can have them with you in fifteen minutes. I assure you, they are most competent."

"I'm sure they are," Prendergast smiled sarcastically. "However, I'm also sure they all have extensive criminal records. I think it is better if you leave that side of security to me, Arkady. After all, Mr Lowe is a respectable businessman. It wouldn't do for people to think he is the kind of man to associate with gangsters."

For Freddie Binns, the moment came as he sat in his apartment contemplating lost opportunities.

He had received some bad news earlier in the evening. In the wake of Jimmy Nayles's death, the decision had been reached by the shadowy organisation he worked for to suspend operations for a couple of days. For Freddie, who had three ex-wives and a gambling habit to support, it had seemed a disaster. If business was shut down, it meant two days without income.

It was all the fault of whichever jerk decided to kill Jimmy Nayles, he told himself as he sat in the living room flicking through the channels on his Tri-D player. He didn't care why Jimmy Nayles had been murdered, any more than he cared how or when: all that mattered to him was the fact the mob boss's sudden passing had curtailed his various money-making ventures. Between recruiting mutant labour, and fleecing the mutants for every credit he could get from them, Freddie usually made a pretty good living. Now though, he found himself in the midst of an unexpected financial crisis.

Guess I shouldn't have bet on the Seltics to beat the Saints, he thought as he dejectedly switched from the sports channels to the news. Ten grand on that bunch of losers? What was I thinking?

His biggest problem was that he had bet ten thousand credits he did not have. Between three sets of alimony payments and some recent reverses while playing cards, he was almost tapped out. Unless he could make up the shortfall in his income and fast, his dealings with his friendly neighbourhood bookie were likely to enter leg-breaking territory very quickly.

It's a shame I don't know who popped Jimmy Nayles, he thought. Boris the Shark told me the bosses are offering a hundred grand to anybody who

call tell 'em what the guy's name is. A hundred grand. A chunk like that, it could solve all my problems.

It was then, almost as though in answer to his thoughts, he saw a familiar face on the Tri-D. Boosting the volume, he heard the news announcer say it was the picture of a person the Judges wanted for questioning about the murder of Konrad Gruschenko AKA James Nales AKA Jimmy Nayles. The announcer continued to say the fugitive was believed to be dangerous and citizens should keep their distance, but Freddie was no longer listening. He looked at the Tri-D player and saw a picture of Lenny the Mutie floating in the air before him.

Lenny the Mutie? The Judges thought Lenny the Mutie had popped Jimmy Nayles?

Freddie could hardly believe it. All this time he had been bemoaning his financial situation while, unknowingly, he had been sitting on a jackpot. He smiled, feeling a thrill run through his heart as he realised he was looking at the opportunity of a lifetime.

That hundred grand was as good as his already.

SEVENTEEN

INNOCENT BLOOD

For Leonard, the fourth killing he attempted on Daniel's behalf brought with it an unwelcome surprise.

It began easily enough. They took their usual path through the sewers and the underblock maintenance tunnels beneath the city, before making their way into the vents of the air-conditioning system of the housing block where the bad man lived. Emerging into the living room of an apartment on the twentieth floor, Leonard heard the sound of running water coming from the kitchen and followed it to its source. There, he saw a woman standing with her back to him, humming an absent-minded tune as she rinsed dirty dishes in the sink.

We've found him, Daniel whispered in his mind. *That's one of the bad men. Kill him, Leonard. Kill him now*.

Confused, Leonard hesitated in the doorway as he stared at the woman. There was no one else in the room. It was clear Daniel was talking about the woman at the sink. But how could the boy think she was a man?

Abruptly, the woman turned away from the sink. Seeing Leonard standing behind her, she dropped the dish in her hand to shatter on the floor. She looked at him in terror, her mouth opening in the beginning of a scream.

"Kill him, Leonard!" Daniel shouted the words aloud. "He's one of the men who hurt me! Kill him now!"

Spurred into action, Leonard crossed the distance to the woman in two broad steps and clamped his hands around her throat to stop her from screaming. Still confused, he did not tighten his grip. He hesitated, staring into the women's frightened eyes as Daniel screamed louder.

"What are you waiting for?" Daniel said. "I told you to kill him! Do it now!"

"But she's a woman, Daniel," Leonard said. His pulse pounded wildly in his head, keeping time with the pulse he could feel racing in the woman's throat. "Can't you see that? Something's wrong here. You can't ask me to-"

"Mama!" a child's voice suddenly yelled out behind him.

Turning, Leonard saw two terrified, crying children standing in the kitchen doorway. They were wearing pyjamas, one of them clutching a

stuffed teddy bear to her chest as they both stared at him in wide-eyed horror. Seeing the family resemblance between the children and the woman whose throat he held clutched in his hands, Leonard realised they must have been woken from sleep by the noise and had come to the kitchen to find a monster strangling their mother. Leonard felt a sudden sickening chill run through his body. Looking at the children's faces, he saw a reflection of the face he knew he must have worn when the Judges came to take him from his mother. In a burst of insight unlike any he had ever experienced, he realised Daniel had nearly made him into the kind of creature that people assumed he must be when they saw his face. Monster. Woman-killer. Mother-killer. A thing from nightmares.

"Kill them!" Daniel shrieked at the top of his lungs. Curiously, the sound was so shrill and piercing it made Leonard's own throat hurt. "There's three of them here now! Three of the bad men! Kill them! Kill them all now!"

Appalled, Leonard looked from the children to their mother and back again. It was all too much for him to bear. The idea of killing this woman, of leaving her children to lives as bleak and lonely as his own, struck to the very depths of his soul. For the first time, he refused to do what Daniel told him. It was repugnant. Monstrous. He released his grip on the woman's throat. He pushed past the children, stumbling back towards the air-conditioning vent as Daniel screamed vehemently at him. But Leonard was no longer listening. He had to escape the apartment. He needed to put as much distance as possible between himself and the accusing glares of the children. He did the only thing he could.

Horrified at what Daniel had almost made him do, Leonard ran.

And, after that, he kept on running.

The call came in at a little after 21.00.

Anderson and Lang had been in the mess hall at Sector House 45, taking a meal break after each enduring another ten minute session in the sleep machine to help keep their wits sharp as they continued to work their homicide investigation. Over the last several hours, a dozen of the child victims in the meme-encoder recordings had been identified and located. They and their families had been brought into protective custody at the Sector House. Meanwhile, another two dozen victims had either turned out to be dead or were as yet unidentified.

Under the watchful eyes of the Psi-Judges, two psych-trained Med-Judges who specialised in dealing with abuse survivors had been seconded to the Sector House to begin the delicate task of questioning the now-adult victims. It had been a harrowing, disturbing process, but one that Anderson realised was sadly necessary. They were now dealing with two parallel cases: on one hand there was the case of the abuse ring that had operated fifty years ago; on the other, the current murders which seemed somehow tied up with those earlier crimes. The hope was the survivors' testimony would shed light on both cases: allowing the Judges to arrest any of the perps from the fifty-year-old case who were still alive, and bring in the killers of Konrad Gruschenko and the others.

The call from Control caught her unawares. She had nearly spilled her cup of synthi-caf as her radio suddenly blurted out a breathless message.

"Control to Anderson! Attempted homicide at John Steinbeck Block! The description and MO of the perp matches those in the Gruschenko, Kapinski and Mayzell homicides! Anderson, please respond!"

"Anderson here, Control. Did you say 'attempted' homicide? Is there a surviving victim? Over."

"Affirmative to that, Anderson. First Judges on the scene report the perp escaped no more than five minutes - repeat five minutes - before they arrived. Tactical and Tek resources have been dispatched to the scene to track him. You'd better get over there ASAP. Looks like you just caught a break."

They were bad men, Daniel said. The boy had stopped yelling the words out loud, but his voice was still shrill enough in Leonard's head to make him wince. *And you didn't kill them! You broke your promise!*

Ignoring the boy, Leonard crawled hurriedly through the vents of the building's air-conditioning system. From time-to-time, he heard voices shouting and the noises of machines, the sounds reverberating through the vents around him. The Judges were on his trail: he was sure of it. He couldn't let them catch him. If they did, they would not just deport him back to the Cursed Earth. He was a murderer. They would put him in an iso-cube - a metal box without windows - and leave him to die there. Then, he would never see his mother. Leonard had to escape. He had to.

You broke your promise, Daniel said. *Cross your heart, that's what you told me! Cross your heart, you'd make them die!*

Re-tracing the path he had taken in entering the building, Leonard finally squeezed free of the vents and arrived in the underblock maintenance tunnels. The tunnels were wider than the vents, allowing him to walk upright so long as he crouched his body and kept his head bowed. Wary in case the Judges were close behind him, Leonard ran through the tunnels and headed down toward the sewers.

Cross your heart, you said, Daniel's voice was angry and insistent. *You broke your promise...*

No, Leonard finally answered the boy. *I promised I'd kill the bad men, Daniel. But they weren't bad men. They were a woman and her kids*.

Liar! Liar! Liar! Liar! The boy shrieked in childish petulance. *You're a liar! Leonard is a big fat li--*

A woman and her kids, Leonard said. *They looked at me like I was a monster*.

No! The boy refused to listen to reason. *No! They were men! Three men! I saw them with their wrinkled faces and ugly beards! I recognised them! They were one of the men who hurt me!*

"One" of the men? Despite the threat of the Judges, Leonard abruptly stopped running, his mind pulling up short at something Daniel had said. Daniel, there were three of them. How could three people be 'one' of the men who hurt you?

Thinking for a moment, Leonard experienced another sudden burst of insight. The sensation of it almost made him dizzy.

Daniel, he said as he turned towards the boy. *Tell me exactly what you saw*.

"He was a monster," the woman said. A Med-Judge had given her a sedative to calm her nerves, but she seemed on the brink of hysteria. "He was huge. And that face... Oh drokk... that face..."

"You said he put his hands around your throat?" Anderson spoke gently as she tried to coax more from the woman. She reminded herself of the information she had been given by a street Judge as she and Lang had arrived at the scene. The street Judge has said the woman's name was Miriam Joyce. "And then, suddenly, he let you go? Is that right, Miriam?"

"He started to argue with himself," the woman said. Her hand checked gingerly at the bruises on her throat as she relived the experience. "He began talking to himself in two different voices. I know it sounds crazy, but

he used two voices like he had two people inside him. One of them was deep; it sounded like it was his real voice. The other was higher pitched. It sounded like the voice of a child... Oh Grud, it was the child part of him that kept telling him to kill me..."

Losing her composure, she dissolved into tears as the floodgates of delayed emotion suddenly burst open. Uncomfortable at the thought of inflicting more suffering on a woman who was already traumatised, Anderson began to back away. Abruptly, though, the woman reached out and grabbed her hand, her eyes staring up at Anderson through the tears as though she had some vital message she wanted to pass on before she forgot it.

"I saw him," Miriam Joyce said. "The child, I mean. I saw the monster and then, when he put his hands around my throat, his face changed. Suddenly, he looked like a child. It's impossible, I know. But you have to believe me... I'm not crazy..."

"No, you're not crazy, Miriam," Anderson soothed her. As the woman's tears began to flow more freely, she hugged her. "It's all right," she told her. "We believe you."

"It's all wrong," Leonard said afterwards, his voice barely more than a whisper as he entered the sewers while Daniel clung to his shoulders. "You have to accept it, Daniel. Those people weren't who you thought they were. They weren't the bad men. We killed the wrong people."

In the end it had been so simple. Instead of telling Leonard what he had seen in the apartment, Daniel had shown him. Laying his palm across Leonard's forehead, Daniel had sent pictures directly into his mind. Leonard had seen every aspect of the incident inside the apartment from Daniel's viewpoint, observing the scene through the boy's eyes from beginning to end. In place of the woman by the sink, Daniel had seen a leering old man. In place of her children he had seen two more old men, their features identical to the first. Initially, Leonard could not understand it. How could he and Daniel have been in the same place at the same time and seen totally different things?

Then, abruptly, an idea had occurred to him.

"Show me the others," Leonard had said. "Show me the men we killed. The box man, the headset man and Jimmy Nayles: show me what they looked like."

Again, Daniel had complied. Again, Leonard had seen that each of the men he had killed had looked completely different to Daniel's eyes. Their faces were not the same. Their heights and builds, even their ages, had been different. In each case there was a family resemblance between the men he had killed and the men Daniel had seen, but they were not the same men; Leonard was sure of it.

"We did a bad thing, Daniel," Leonard said as he waded through the muck of the sewers. "We have innocent blood on our hands. We killed the wrong people."

Clinging restlessly to his shoulders, Daniel maintained a sulky silence.

A family resemblance. The thought churned uneasily inside Leonard's head. He felt on the verge of another insight. It was strange: normally it took Leonard weeks to come up with a single idea, never mind three in one day. At times it was as though he had been slowly growing smarter ever since he had met Daniel. As though his close connection to the boy - the same connection that allowed Daniel to whisper and send pictures directly into his head - had caused some of the boy's intelligence to rub off on him. Whatever the cause, Leonard felt a new insight forming within him. The non-existent people Daniel had seen had all resembled the real people who Leonard had killed. Suddenly, the insight came to him with the force of a bullet.

"Daniel?" he said gently. "You said the bad men hurt you? When did it happen?"

"A few days ago," the little boy said. Still angry at Leonard, his voice was grumpy.

"And when did we kill Jimmy Nayles?" Leonard asked him. It was as though the question appeared in his mind of its own volition.

"A few days ago," Daniel said, shifting uneasily on Leonard's shoulders as though he found the question boring.

"And when did we first meet?" Leonard asked.

"A few days ago," Daniel said.

The insight was right. Suddenly, Leonard had begun to understand everything.

"Daniel?" Leonard said. "The bad men who hurt you? I think that might have happened a long time ago. A real long time. I think the bad men are all gone now.

"I think we've been killing their children."

"One man, two voices," Lang said to Anderson later, once the Med-Judges had taken Miriam Joyce away for medical treatment. "You heard what she said. Two voices arguing with each other, like a split personality. Sounds like a text book case of MPD."

Despite the fact the witness statement had given support to the theory she had advanced earlier, there was nothing of triumph in Lang's expression. Like Anderson, she seemed dog-tired: two sleep machine sessions in the last twenty-four hours had proved a poor substitute for the real sleep they both desperately needed.

"It could be," Anderson said. She had just received a report from the street Judges and Teks assigned to track the perp's path through the building. They had come up empty: even with the short lead-time between his escape from the apartment and the arrival of the first Judges on the scene, the perp had managed to vanish like a ghost. "But it doesn't explain the rest of Miriam Joyce's testimony. The way his face changed to the face of a child. I know eyewitness testimony is unreliable, but it ties in with the results of the psi-scans from the previous victims. Maybe we should call in to Control and-"

"Control to Anderson!" the radio blared on her belt.

"Speak of the devil," Anderson muttered. She grimaced as she pressed the transmit button on the radio mic, half-expecting news of another murder.

"Anderson here, Control. What have you got?"

"An update on the public response to the photo-scan of your perp that was released to the media. Since the image went on air, Justice Department had received one thousand five hundred and seventy-nine calls from individuals claiming that they know the perp. Mostly the usual sponts, weirdos, and crackpots. However, the Watch Commander at Sector House 46 reports that a suspect arrested in one of the Operation Lazarus raids has come forward with what seems like solid info on your perp's name and address."

EIGHTEEN

LEONARD UNLEASHED

Leonard had been back at the hostel for less than half an hour by the time the killers came for him.

Seeking a place to gather his thoughts in the wake of recent revelations, he had returned to City Bottom with Daniel in tow. The boy's mood had not improved. All the way back to the third floor room where Leonard lived, Daniel had argued with him relentlessly, wheedling and pleading in his attempts to persuade him to kill another of the so-called bad men. Leonard had been adamant, though: now he was convinced that Daniel wanted him to kill innocent people, he refused to be bound by his promise. Admittedly, he had not necessarily thought everything through. Inwardly, Leonard was aware that without Daniel's help he would never be able to find his mother. But though he still wanted Daniel to help him, he was no longer willing to pay the price if it meant more innocent people would die.

They were at a stalemate. The argument between them raged back and forth, without being resolved. No matter how often Leonard tried to explain his insights to Daniel - that the bad men Daniel saw were not really there - the boy refused to listen. It was as though the idea that Leonard might be right was somehow too terrible for Daniel to contemplate.

Then, in the middle of their dispute, Leonard heard the sound of men in the distance moving towards the hostel and felt a nameless instinct warn him of danger.

It was difficult to tell without seeing them, but he estimated there were a dozen of them at least. It was not so much the fact there were so many men outside that spooked him. Even in City Bottom, large groups of people - other mutants, mostly - sometimes passed by the hostel, minding their own business. No, the unsettling part was that the men outside were trying to move too quietly. Raised in the ways of the Cursed Earth, it was a sound Leonard knew well. The sounds of hunters stalking their prey.

Motioning Daniel to be quiet, Leonard doused the lantern in his room and crept towards the window. Looking out cautiously, he counted fifteen men advancing stealthily under cloak of darkness on his side of the hostel. He smelt the scent of gun oil, watching as the men manoeuvred to cover all the

exits. It was clear they were not Judges. They were all dressed head-to-toe in black, including black masks, and they were heavily armed.

Stealing a glance at the old rifle propped up in the corner of his room, Leonard cursed himself for his lack of foresight. He should have used some of his wages to get Freddie Binns to buy him some more ammo when he had had the chance. Now, it was too late. The rifle was empty and all but useless.

Downstairs, he heard the thud of explosions as the men outside threw grenades into the ground floor of the hostel. He heard mutants screaming in pain, followed by the muffled pop of silenced gunshots as the armed men advanced into the hostel to finish what their grenades had started. He heard more screams, and more gunfire, as the mutants he had lived and worked with were slaughtered on the floors below him. The sounds were moving closer, but Leonard was already hurrying from his room to meet them. He was unarmed.

If the rifle was useless, then he would just have to use his hands.

"The perp's name is Lenny," Judge Patton said, his voice raised to make himself heard over the roar of the H-Wagon's engines as he briefed the assembled members of his tac-team seated either side of him. "No surname - just Lenny. He's a mutant, wanted for three homicides that we know of. You'll find a picture of him, along with further details, on the briefing monitors beside your seats. Study them closely. And pay particular attention to the fact the perp is strong enough to bend plastisteel with his bare hands. If he decides to come quietly, that's fine. But we don't take any chances. Be prepared to use lethal force if need be."

Seated next to Lang at the end of one of the files of Judges, Anderson checked the magazine of her Lawgiver as she prepared herself for action. The H-Wagon and tac-team assistance had been summoned at short notice. The informant who had claimed to know the perp's name and location had turned out to be a career criminal by the name of Einar Jensen. Having been captured during one of the sweeps for Operation Lazarus, Jensen had attempted to make a deal for his freedom by offering up the killer of Jimmy Nayles based on the photo-scan released to the media. But the Judges of Mega-City One didn't do deals. Instead, Anderson and Lang had been summoned to perform a psychic interrogation. Courtesy of a telepathic probe of Jensen's mind they had learned Nayles's killer was a mutant named

Lenny who lived in a ruined apartment building in City Bottom. Meanwhile, Jensen himself had been sent to the cubes with an additional five years added to his sentence for Withholding Information. Whatever private concerns she might have about the quality of justice in Mega-City One, Anderson was forced to admit it was certainly thorough.

"ETA to location: three minutes," the voice of the H-Wagon's pilot came over their radios. "I'm reading multiple gunflashes up ahead. At least two dozen hostiles. Looks like a major firefight has broken out at your target location."

"Call for backup," Patton said, gruffly. "Drop us three hundred metres from the target. Then, get airborne again and light up the hostiles."

"Understood," the pilot replied. "Taking her down now."

There was a sudden feeling of almost-weightlessness as the H-Wagon abruptly changed direction and started to descend. As it landed on City Bottom, the side doors slid open automatically, disgorging its cargo of Judges.

"Spread out." Anderson heard Patton's voice barking orders over her radio as she followed the tac-team out of the H-Wagon with Lang beside her. "We advance as a single firing line. Maintain noise and light discipline. Safeties off and stay sharp."

Hurrying to her position on the line, Anderson found she had to be careful to avoid tripping over the garbage and other assorted debris littering the rockcrete. At this time of night City Bottom was pitch black; the lights of the Big Meg above it were too far away to be anything more than a distant gleam in the darkness. Not for the first time in her Judicial career, she had reason to regret the fact she did not wear a helmet. The standard Mark Two helmets the tac-team members wore were equipped with an infrared vision filter, allowing them to see up to ten metres in absolute darkness. Like most Psi-Judges, however, Anderson dispensed with wearing a helmet because she found they got in the way of her powers. At that precise moment she was tempted to consider it a price worth paying if it prevented her falling on her face.

"Get ready," she heard Patton say as the Judges swiftly crossed the intervening distance to their target and took up their positions. Ahead, she could see dim shapes moving in the darkness as she heard the quiet, yet distinctive sound of silenced gunshots.

Suddenly, the night was banished by a blinding radiance as the H-Wagon overhead illuminated the target and its vicinity in the eye-burning glare of its searchlights. Revealed in the light, Anderson saw half a dozen gunmen intent on gunning down fleeing groups of terrified mutants. The gunmen's arms and equipment were state-of-the-art: jet-black combat armour, silenced spit guns, grenades, IR visors. They went about their business with a cool, professional detachment. Anderson tagged them at once as top-of-the-line mercenaries rather than common-or-garden street punks.

"This is the Justice Department!" the roar of the pilot's voice over the H-Wagon's public address speakers was deafening. "You are all under arrest! Drop your guns and put your hands on your heads! This is your final warning!"

In response, some of the mercs began to fire at the H-Wagon above them. Whoever they were, they didn't scare easy.

"Pick your targets," Patton ordered over the radio. "Fire at will!"

There was a brief flurry of gunshots as the Judges opened fire, cutting the mercs down in a hail of bullets. As the last of the mercs fell, Anderson saw further gunflashes come from inside the apartment house ahead of them. There were more hostiles inside it, but the way was now clear for the Judges to advance.

"Move forward!" Patton yelled. "We go in hard and heavy! Take prisoners if you can, but whatever else happens I want those hostiles subdued ASAP!"

In common with every other firefight it had ever been Anderson's misfortune to experience, what happened next was all but lost in a welter of chaos and contradictions. Advancing into the apartment building, the Judges found more of the mercs waiting for them. What had begun as an ordered advance degenerated into a series of individual firefights and Anderson abruptly realised she had lost sight of Lang in the confusion. Pressing on regardless in search of the fugitive giant, she suddenly found herself confronted by a merc who turned away from trying to shoot a frightened mutant to wheel his spit gun towards her.

"Psi Division! Drop your weapon!"

Seeing the merc refuse to comply, she fired three shots and put him down. Then, running toward the merc's would-be former victim, she grabbed the mutant by the scruff of the neck before he could escape.

"Where's Lenny?" she shouted at him. "Big guy. Face like a bat. And don't tell me you don't know him!"

"He lives up on the third floor," the mutant said. Up close, he had whiskers and an elongated nose like a rat. "Please, don't shoot me! I didn't do nothing!"

Releasing him, Anderson headed up the decrepit staircase towards the third floor, carefully picking her way past the steps that seemed most likely to collapse beneath her. On the third floor landing she found a merc lying dead on his back with his chest torn open. Glancing at his body as she passed it, she noticed an old surgical scar and a telltale bundle of wires peeking out from beneath his ripped body armour above his heart. She recognised the signs at once. The merc had been equipped with a blitzer bomb: an explosive device implanted in his heart and designed to detonate if the unfortunate wearer tried to surrender.

Guess that explains why these creeps refuse to give up, she thought. If they even think of trying to surrender - boom, off goes the bomb.

Hearing the sound of more gunshots somewhere off the landing, she cautiously advanced towards them. Until, turning a corner she caught her first sight of the mutant Lenny at work.

He stood in the middle of the corridor, coat tails flapping about him and his fists covered in blood. A number of mercs lay strewn the entire length of the corridor, their necks and bodies broken, lying dead where the mutant had killed them. As Anderson watched in horror, she saw the giant punch his open hand through the chest of the last remaining merc, his fingers emerging bloodily from the man's back as the mutant's hand pushed right through him. As Lenny pulled his hand free from the merc's chest, Anderson saw the man's body collapse like a broken rag doll. Then, she saw the mutant start to turn her way.

"You're under arrest!" she yelled. "Freeze or I shoot!"

Incredibly, as the mutant turned towards her, she saw there was a child hanging from the mutant's shoulders with his arms around the creature's neck. It was a little boy, about seven or eight years of age. Recognising the boy's face from the psi-scans he had performed on each of the mutant's victims, she hesitated. The mutant was charging towards her, as fast as a locomotive, moving with a speed that belied his size. Wary of hitting the child with a through-and-through, she fired low. She hit the mutant in the

groin. Too late, she realised there was a window. The mutant kept on coming, barrelling into her, the impact jarring her bones.

Together, they went through the window.

She landed in a heap of garbage on the ground below the window, crash-landing with an impact even more jarring than when the mutant had charged into her. Half stunned, for a moment Anderson tried to find her bearings.

The mutant had landed on his feet and had already started to run away from the apartment house. There were Judges in his way. She saw them try to stop him. Concerned they would hit the child while shooting at the mutant, she tried to shout out a warning. Too late again, she saw the Judges open fire. A dozen shots hit the mutant. At least three of them exited from his back and into the child.

For the second time in as many minutes, Anderson saw something incredible. The bullets passed right through the child's body as though he was intangible, leaving him unharmed.

The mutant charged towards the Judges. She saw him punch a Judge in the face, his fist crushing the man's helmet and the skull inside it like they were eggshells. He pushed another Judge out of his way, then clubbed a third one a sickening blow with his hand that snapped the Judge's neck. Racing clear, the mutant jumped high in the air, covering fifty metres in a single leap. He leapt again. And again.

As the last shots from the Judges faded away, the mutant was out of sight.

If there was one thing Freddie Binns was unhappy about, it was that it turned out it was a lot more dangerous making a hundred grand than he had expected.

Sitting in a hover van parked a kilometre away from the mutant hostel, he listened to the distant sounds of gunshots and shifted uneasily in his seat. A few hours ago, when he had seen Lenny's picture on the Tri-D news, it had seemed like the perfect score. Now, he was not so sure.

It should have all been so simple. When he had gone to his contact with the info on Jimmy Nayles's killer, his only fear had been that somebody else might beat him to it. Unfortunately, it had soon turned out the Russians weren't about to just give him the money - not when his information was

still untested. Instead, they had insisted he should accompany their kill-team down to City Bottom.

"You will be their guide," one of the Sovs had told him. "Then, when the job is done, they will bring you the head so you can confirm the kill."

Naturally, the guy hadn't bothered to lay out the subtext behind their conditions. He had known as well as Freddie that the other major reason they had dragged him down to City Bottom was so they could make him "disappear" if it turned out he was trying to con them. Not that Freddie would have ever dreamed of running a game on a bunch of Russkies. From all accounts, they were stone-cold bastards: if somebody pissed them off, they were likely to get a finger chopped off or worse - and that was only for minor infractions. The word on the street said if you drokked with the Sov gangers, you ended up dead. And Freddie, who had no ambition to die of anything other than heart failure in the arms of a couple of high-class hookers when he was an old man in his dotage, would no more try to con a Russky than he would his dear old mom. The info he had on Lenny was solid. So solid, his only thoughts when he had set out for City Bottom were about how he was going to spend his money.

Still, the fact it currently sounded like he was sitting uncomfortably close to the outbreak of World War IV, had given him cause for seconds thoughts.

Guess this is what you get for betraying a friend, he thought to himself. Well, I guess not so much a friend. I mean, Lenny was as dumb as three-day old munce, while having a conversation with him was like pulling teeth. Then again, he wasn't such a bad sort. Almost a shame, really, that he had to die to make me rich. I guess them's the breaks.

Abruptly, as Freddie sat in the van, he saw a dark shadow loom over him. Turning to look through the passenger window to his side, he saw Lenny standing there with a face like thunder. Before Freddie could react, Lenny had smashed his arms through the Plexiglas and pulled him, squirming, out through the window.

Oh drokk, he knows what I did, Freddie thought, as he found himself held by the scruff of the neck in Lenny's hands while his feet dangled uselessly above the ground. Think fast, Freddie! You got to come up with something good!

"Lenny!" he said, putting on his best "hail fellow, well met" smile. "Thank Grud, I found you! I've come to warn you! Somebody's put out a hit on you!"

"You did, Freddie," Lenny rumbled at him, his voice slow and angry. "You act like my friend. But you aren't my friend. You're a liar."

"Why, sure I'm your friend," Freddie exclaimed, widening his smile as though he couldn't quite understand what Lenny was getting at. "You and me, we've been friends ever since you came to the city. That's why I'm always looking out for you. Break my neck if I'm lying."

For the last ever time in his life - or Freddie's, for that matter - Leonard did exactly what Freddie had asked him.

NINETEEN

TO LIVE FOREVER

For Roderick Lowe, it was the day his new life was destined to begin.

Concerned by the progressive decline in the functioning of his organs, his doctors summoned a private hover ambulance to take him to the Don Siegel Medical Centre at just after midnight. Mr Lowe had been scheduled to undergo a surgical procedure at the same hospital the next morning; however, given the perilous state of the patient's health it was decided to bring the operation forward immediately.

While the doctors hurried and flustered around him, though, Roderick Lowe felt only a serene sense of inner calm. Earlier, his man Prendergast had assured him that everything was ready. With the aid of Gruschenko's protÈgÈ Arkady, a suitable donor had been found. Through the avaricious Dr Langstock, a world-class surgical team had been assembled. Nothing could go wrong. If money could bring a man anything, it was the peace of mind that came from knowing his life was in the best possible hands.

His life. Where once he had feared it was drawing to a close, Roderick Lowe was amused by the concept now. His life would never end. He would live forever, and all because the ingenuity of medical science had reached a level that a man's death could now be cheated indefinitely.

A Total Body Transplant. That was what the doctors called it. Really, it was such a prosaic name. Mr Lowe preferred to think of it in terms of a much more ancient term.

Immortality. Such was the prize his money would buy him.

The doctors had explained the procedure to him in extraordinary detail. Through various arcane scientific methods he did not even pretend to understand, his consciousness would be transferred wholesale to a younger and more healthy body. He had been assured that nothing of his mind would be lost: in his new body his memories, personality and desires would be perfectly intact.

And why stop at one transplant, after all? When he wore out this new body, he would simply transfer to another one, and another one, and another one. He would be beyond mortality. Beyond morality. He would endure forever, free to indulge his special pleasures as often as he wanted. Entire new worlds of pleasure lay before him.

Roderick Lowe could hardly wait.

For Leonard, it was beginning to look like it might be the day he was going to die.

He had been hurt badly by the Judges' bullets. He could count twelve different wounds in his body: four in the chest, three in the stomach, one in the groin, one in each leg, and two in his left arm. He was tough, and he didn't hurt easy, but he knew he had lost a lot of blood. Enough blood that he was starting to worry he might not make it to tomorrow.

It was not the idea of dying in the sewers that bothered him. After the Judges and the gunmen had attacked them, he and Daniel had had no choice but to seek refuge there. Nor was it the idea of dying, in and of itself, that caused him concern. No, it was the thought that he might die without ever seeing his mother again that really bothered him. To Leonard, the very idea of it seemed like the hardest thing he had ever had to bear.

It was Daniel who had come up with a solution. The boy had been quiet for a long time, lost in his own thoughts as he brooded over the things Leonard had told him earlier.

Finally, Daniel had offered him a bargain.

"Kill one more bad man, Leonard," Daniel said. "Kill one more, and I'll tell you where your mother is."

At first, Leonard was suspicious. Their recent arguments had diminished the sense of trust between them. He refused to spill any more innocent blood. This time, though, Daniel said things were different. This time, Daniel knew for sure that the man he wanted Leonard to kill was a really bad man. He was the worst of them all, and Daniel had planned on leaving him to last. But now, the bad old man had found a way to escape him. If they didn't kill him tonight, it would be too late.

The boy kept offering the same bargain to Leonard, over and over again. Eventually, he wore Leonard down. Desperate to find his mother, Leonard agreed to Daniel's terms.

"All right, Daniel," Leonard said, finally. "I'll kill the bad old man. Cross my heart, I'll make him die."

For Anderson, it was a day of insights and revelations.

Having been reunited with Lang as more Judges arrived as backup in the wake of the slaughter at City Bottom, she and Lang had joined a new tac-team as they tracked the blood trail left by the giant. Aided by a PSU spy-

bot equipped with an electronic nose that allowed it to function as a hi-tech bloodhound, they had followed the trail into the sewers. It was clear the mutant was badly wounded, but even as they gained on him the mutant kept on going.

"Psychic possession," Anderson said. She had already told Lang about her encounter with the child. "It's the one thing that explains all the anomalies in this case. The mutant Lenny must be a spirit medium, while the boy is a psychic entity who Lenny's been channelling. That's why the victims always saw the boy's face when Lenny was strangling them. It's generally accepted that people become more psychically sensitive at the point of death. What the victims were really seeing was the boy riding Lenny through psychic possession, but they perceived it as the boy's face on the giant's body."

"So you think the kid is some kind of ghost?" Lang asked her.

"Probably," Anderson said. "It could be he's some other form of psychic entity and he only looks like a child. But if he's a ghost that would explain a lot of things. If he's some kind of restless spirit, still stuck on Earth because he has unfinished business here, that could explain the motive for the murders."

"How so?" Lang asked.

"Think about it," Anderson said. "On one hand, we have fifty-year-old recordings of children being abused. On the other, we have a series of murders somehow linked to the abuse. Maybe the boy was one of the victims and he's trying to even the score by killing his tormentors."

"But he doesn't kill the abusers, he kills their children," Lang said. "How do you explain that?"

"That's just it. That's what makes me think the kid is a ghost. In a lot of hauntings, the ghost will act as though nothing has changed since they died - they'll walk through a wall because there used to be a doorway there, or they'll walk up staircases that haven't existed for hundreds of years. In general, hauntings are linked to traumatic deaths. Maybe the trauma of their death is so bad sometimes, the ghost blots the whole thing out and doesn't even realise that he or she is dead. In this case, maybe the kid is going after the abusers. But he doesn't realise fifty years have passed and most of the original abusers are dead. So instead, without even realising it, he makes the giant kill the children of the abusers, punishing them for the sins of their fathers. But again, the kid doesn't know he's doing this. He may even

perceive the abusers' children as the abusers themselves. Like I say, he's blotting out anything that proves he is dead."

"It's a nice theory," Lang said. "Hell, it's a great theory. So how does Gruschenko fit into all this?"

"There I'm really guessing," Anderson replied. "It could be Gruschenko was part of the abuse ring. Or, more likely given his criminal activities, he could have been procuring children for them or helping protect the abusers in some way. Maybe they even planned on making the meme-encoders into a commercial enterprise and they hired Gruschenko for his know-how. What we do know is that, unlike Joseph Kapinski's father, Gruschenko was still alive. That meant the boy could take vengeance on the man himself rather than one of his descendants."

"It fits," Lang said. The rookie Judge seemed subtly impressed. "So you're assuming Miriam Joyce is also the child of an abuser."

"I am," Anderson said. "It could even be she was abused herself. But that's a question for later. Right now, we have to concentrate on bringing down the giant before he gets wherever it is he is going. Otherwise, it's probably only a matter of time before he kills again."

TWENTY

MONSTERS

The moment Leonard emerged into the sub-level basement of the building, he knew at once it was a hospital. There were medicinal smells all around him. Idly, he wondered if it might be possible to get one of the doctors to tend to his wounds. Still, he could leave that until later.

First, he had an old man to kill.

"This blood looks fresh," one of the tac-team Judges said as they made their way from the underblock maintenance tunnels, through a ripped-open access hatchway, into a building sub-level. "We're gaining on the creep. He must only be a few minutes ahead of us."

"Check," Anderson said, as she stepped through the hatchway behind him. "All right, assuming the perp is still in the building, I suggest we fan out. If anyone catches sight of him, make a report ASAP. Whatever else happens, nobody is to tackle Lenny on their own. And especially not without Psi-Judge backup. You saw what he did to the Judges back at City Bottom? Well now, we're working on the assumption he is in the company of some kind of psychic entity. All of which only makes him more dangerous."

"Grud! Anderson, look at this!" Hearing Lang call to her, Anderson followed her fellow Psi-Judge over to a storage rack that was piled high with cartons of bleach and other cleaning products. Lang pointed to the side of one of the cartons. "Look at the label on this container. 'Property of the Don Siegel Medical Centre'. We're inside a hospital!"

"So we're in a building full of sick people with a mad dog killer on the loose?" Anderson said. "In that case, we have to find Lenny and fast. Everybody spread out. We'll search the entire hospital if we have to. We need to find him n-"

Suddenly, they heard a distant scream. A woman's voice from the sound of it, screaming in terror from somewhere up above them.

"Forget what I said about spreading out," Anderson said as she raced towards the elevator. "I get the feeling if we want to find Lenny, our best way is to follow the screaming."

Prendergast heard the scream as he stood watching Mr Lowe's operation outside the observation window to Surgical Theatre One. At once, he turned to the bodyguards standing beside him.

"Two of you come with me," he said, as he jogged off in the direction of the noise. "The rest of you stay here with Mr Lowe."

Leave her, Daniel said. They had just turned a corridor when they had run into a nurse pushing a med-trolley before her. The woman had screamed, then fainted, her head making an awful cracking sound as it hit the floor. She lay unconscious on the floor, blood seeping from a wound at the back of her scalp to stain her white nurse's cap red.

I think she's hurt, Leonard said. *I didn't mean to scare her.*

Leave her, Leonard. Daniel was insistent. *The bad man's guards are coming...*

Edgar Tavish, a professional bodyguard with fifteen years' experience to his credit, was the first to die. He rounded a corner with a gun in his hand, Prendergast and another of Mr Lowe's bodyguards lagging just behind him. He saw a huge and hideous mutant move towards him like quicksilver lightning, followed by a terror-magnified close-up of Leonard's fist the instant before it smashed through his skull.

An instant later, he was dead and he saw no more.

"Drokk!"

Prendergast heard the second bodyguard yell out a shocked oath as the first one died. The mutant was on them so swiftly. The creature's hand shot out, hitting the surviving bodyguard in the stomach, the force of the blow causing fragments of the man's ribcage to explode out of his back. His own reflexes boosted to superhuman levels by certain expensive treatments Mr Lowe had paid for, Prendergast managed to draw his gun and put three manstoppers into the mutie's chest at point blank range.

Screaming in pain, the mutant lashed out with a backhanded blow, catching Prendergast hard enough on the jaw to snap his head back and break his neck. His gun falling from shocked fingers as he slumped against the wall behind him, the last thing Prendergast saw was the mutant's back as the monster turned to head in the direction of Surgical Theatre One. With his last coherent thought, Prendergast opened the hidden catch in the signet

ring on his left hand and pressed the button beneath it. Aided by a powerful miniaturised transmitter concealed inside, it sent out a fifteen-nanosecond burst of encrypted computer code. To anyone without the proper systems to decipher it, the signal was designed to seem meaningless. But to those for whom it was intended, it contained a terse series of commandments that outweighed all other considerations.

"Imminent Threat Override: Omega Level Three. Initiate Deterrence Protocol Five-Zero-Five. Protect Mr Lowe at all costs. Collateral damage is not an issue."

Then everything went black for Nathan Prendergast.

By the time the Judges had identified the fifteenth floor as the source of the disturbance, gunshots rang out across the hallways as hospital staff fled in terror. Emerging from the elevator with Lang and some of the tac-team members, Anderson grabbed the nearest panicking med-tek in search of some answers.

"Where's the mutant?" she said, shaking him by the shoulder when at first he seemed too much in shock to respond. "Who's doing all the shooting?"

"Mutant? What mutant?" the man looked at her as though she was speaking gibberish. "It's Mr Lowe's bodyguards! They've gone crazy! They're shooting anyone who goes near Surgical Theatre One!"

"Then where can I find Theatre One?"

Releasing the man as he pointed her in the right direction, Anderson sprinted down the hallway with the other Judges beside her. Finding two black-suited bodyguards standing on sentry duty at the end of the corridor, she levelled her Lawgiver and ordered them to surrender.

"Psi Division! Drop the weapons and keep your hands where I can see them!"

Moving with almost inhuman quickness the bodyguards whirled to shoot, only to be cut down in a withering fusillade of bullets as Anderson and the other Judges fired in unison.

"Drokk, this is crazy," Anderson said once the shooting was over. "Doesn't anybody surrender anymore?"

"They're cyborgs," one of the tac-Judges said. He stepped over to one of the bodies, and pointed to a buried metal plate peeking out through the scalp wound left by the bullet that had bisected its owner's skull. "Looks like they're carrying some kind of neural wetware. Probably explains how

come they moved so fast. If we hadn't had the drop on them, they probably would've been the ones doing all the shooting. Still, I don't see why they were trying to shoot at Judges."

"It's probably some kind of Threat Override setting," Anderson said. "I've seen it before. They have a neural chip hardwired into the brain stem and limbic system. In extreme threat situations, somebody presses a button and they turn into automatons, shooting at anybody who doesn't have pre-programmed clearance. Right now, that includes us, a bunch of sick people, and a whole lot of innocent bystanders."

"I thought Threat Override settings were banned?" Lang asked.

"They are," Anderson answered. "Whoever this 'Mr Lowe' is, it seems he takes his security very seriously." She turned to face the other Judges. "All right, we're dealing with an unknown number of hostiles who will shoot at anything that moves, not to mention our old friend Lenny. Somebody call for backup. In the meantime, we break off into teams of two Judges each and we clear this floor hallway by hallway. The priority is to get any remaining bystanders out of the line of fire and contain the situation. Lang, you're with me. Let's get going before things get any crazier and the robo-bodyguards turn this entire hospital into a bloodbath."

There he is, Daniel said.

Leonard had killed a dozen men to get them to this place. They were standing by a window looking down into an operating theatre. Below, Leonard saw two men lying unconscious on gurneys, hooked up to all kinds of strange machines, while doctors in green gowns fussed around them.

It's him, Daniel said. *The old man down there, lying on that table. He's the one, Leonard. He's the bad man. Kill him!*

Leaping through the window with a crash of shattering Plexiglas, Leonard landed in the middle of the operating theatre as the doctors recoiled from him in horror. Leonard was exhausted. His body hurt all over. He was slick with blood; his own and other people's. But it was nearly over now. While the doctors ran away in terror, he advanced on the old man asleep on the gurney and put his hands around his throat.

He began to squeeze.

For years to come, Anderson would always blame herself for what happened. It added to the weight of her nightmares, joining all the other

rattlebag terrors that troubled her sleeping mind. Her father, Judge Death, the suicide of her friend Corey. At times it felt like her life was one long string of tragedies and horrors.

It made it no easier that she could have done almost nothing to prevent it. She blamed herself anyway. She was the senior Psi-Judge and Lang was the rookie. It was her job to protect her.

Not the other way around.

They had been advancing down a corridor together, Anderson in the lead while Lang guarded her back. They had passed the bodies of three men lying dead in the hallway; all apparently the bodyguards of the mysterious Mr Lowe. A single glance was enough to tell Anderson their deaths had been Lenny's handiwork. One of them had a fist-sized cavity where his nose should have been; another looked as though his chest had exploded; while the third man lay slumped against the wall, the unnatural angle at which his head rested making it clear his neck had been broken.

Incongruously, she had noticed the third man was wearing a hospital issue nametag pinned to his jacket. His name was Prendergast. She had glanced at it only a moment, but the name had an unusual, old world quality that caused it to linger briefly in her mind. His nails were neatly trimmed and manicured. His suit was expensive. His hair was immaculately styled. He had the look of some high-level business executive rather than a bodyguard, though she supposed that was entirely the point. In the years to come these facts would haunt her. She had noticed all these details with barely a glance, yet somehow missed the most important one of all.

The cyborg bastard was still breathing.

She had walked past and her back was turned towards him when he suddenly came back to life. Her first and only warning came with a shout from Lang behind her.

"Anderson! Look out!"

She had turned, too slowly, and seen the cyborg rise to lift his gun towards her. The microcircuitry grinding in his spine as it tried to compensate for his damaged vertebrae, his lolling head jerking with rag doll slackness at every movent of his body, the gun an extension of his arm as he was compelled with one final desperate effort to adhere to the commandment hardwired into his nervous system. She had tried to bring

her Lawgiver to bear, a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach as she realised she was as good as dead.

It happened so quickly. The cyborg fired. Lang leapt forward into the path of the bullet. Anderson unleashed the remainder of her magazine on rapid fire, sending the cyborg careening back into the wall in a mad puppet dance of blood and splintered bone.

By the time the gunsmoke cleared the cyborg was dead. Anderson was on her knees beside Lang's fallen body. She saw Lang's eyes staring up at her blindly, a finger's-width hole in the centre of her forehead.

A bullet in the head.

It was over very quickly.

Leonard squeezed, tightening his hold on the old man's neck. The body began to jerk and spasm beneath his grip. He was choking the life out of the man while Daniel, for once, watched it happen in silence. The boy looked down at the face of the man he hated above all others, observing his death throes with detachment. The old man's spasms grew wilder. A rattling noise came from his throat. Then, the sounds and the movements stopped. Nearby, a machine began to make a continuous trilling tone. Leonard had done his work.

The old man was dead.

Eleven years old. She is Myrna Lang and she is eleven years old. She hears voices in her head. Worried, her family take her to a doctor. The doctor calls the Judges. They take her from her family. They tell her she is special. They tell her she is psychic. One day she will be a Psi-Judge.

She doesn't want to be a Psi-Judge. She misses her family. She is lonely and unhappy.

The years pass. Her Psi-Tutors try to counsel her, but her feelings do not go away. She begins to hate her own powers. She resents them. If she didn't have psychic powers, she could have a normal life...

"I need a doctor!" Anderson yelled, her voice a lonely echo across empty hallways. Her hands were at Lang's chest, performing compressions, her mind awash with Lang's memories as the physical contact provoked a sudden psychic transference. Blood dripped from an unseen wound hidden by the hair at the back of the rookie's head. Lang's eyes stared blankly up at the ceiling, chillingly lifeless and vacant.

"I need a doctor now!" Anderson yelled again. She continued the compressions, not daring for a moment to stop long enough to either check the woman's pulse or use her own radio to call for assistance. Right now, she suspected her hands were all that was keeping Lang's heart beating.

"C'mon, Lang," she said. "I know you can still hear me. You've got to stay with me!"

There was no reaction. Lang's eyes seemed as empty as the corridors around them.

"C'mon, Lang," the words first became a mantra, then a prayer. "C'mon, Lang."

By the time a doctor finally arrived to help her, Lang's body had started to grow cold.

Thank you, Leonard, Daniel said. In the aftermath of the old man's death, he wore a contented smile. *Thank you for everything. I'm sorry we ever argued. You've been a good friend. The best friend I ever had*.

The moment the old man had breathed his last, something weird had started to happen to Daniel. The boy seemed to fade away before Leonard's eyes, as though he was gradually becoming just as invisible to Leonard as he was to everyone else.

"Daniel?" Confused, Leonard watched the boy continue to fade until he could almost see right through him. "Is there something wrong? Are you all right?"

I'm fine, Leonard, Daniel's smile was calm and peaceful. *I've just found a place where I can be happy. You mustn't be sad. And I remember my promise to you. I said I'd help you find your mother. I know where she is. I've always known, really. But I couldn't tell you before, not until you had helped me*.

Daniel was almost gone now. Even his voice had begun to fade, the sound like the gentle rustling of a breeze through long grass.

Before Leonard knew what was happening, Daniel disappeared. But, with his last words the boy kept his promise. He told Leonard who his mother was and where she lived. Most importantly of all, though, he told him her name.

Grace. His mother's name was Grace.

TWENTY-ONE

REUNIONS, GOODBYES AND UNFINISHED BUSINESS

"We'll do our best," the doctor told Anderson as they wheeled Lang into surgery. "You have to understand, though, there's a limit to what we can do. Even if we manage to stabilise her condition and remove the bullet, there's every chance she's suffered irreparable brain damage."

There were some words which seem final when you hear them from doctors. Watching as Lang was taken into theatre, Anderson realised she felt as helpless in this situation as an ordinary citizen might feel in dealing with a Judge. Nor could she do anything to improve Lang's chances by sitting around the hospital waiting for news. All she could do was head back to the streets.

Besides which, there was the matter of unfinished business.

The mutant, Lenny, had managed to escape from the hospital in the midst of the confusion while Anderson and the other Judges dealt with the threat posed by Roderick Lowe's bodyguards. The irony was the extreme measures Lowe had taken to protect his life had worked against him. While his guards responded to the override command to go on a pre-programmed killing spree, Lenny had broken into the operating theatre and strangled the old man.

Still, irony was a sword that could cut two ways. In this case, it seemed as sharp on one side as it did the other.

For while Lenny the mutant had killed an old man, he had not killed Roderick Lowe.

"It's almost like it was some kind of providence," a twitchy, nervous surgeon named Langstock had told Anderson when she interviewed him in the immediate aftermath of the carnage. "I mean, I'm not a religious man. But, well, if that monster had come into the operating room a few minutes earlier, he would have killed Mr Lowe."

Roderick Lowe was not dead. He had been undergoing a Total Body Transplant when Lenny had attacked him. What the giant could not know, however, was that the procedure had been a success. By the time Lenny entered the operating theatre, Lowe's consciousness had been successfully

transferred to his new body. The old man Lenny had strangled had been nothing more than an empty and discarded shell.

As lucky escapes went, it was right up there with the guy who had fallen off the roof of a two-hundred storey housing block, only to land safely on a window washer's platform suspended outside the one-hundred-and-ninety-ninth floor. Anderson found it difficult to feel any great joy at Lowe's escape, though. From what she knew of the reasons behind the boy and the giant's murder spree, and given Lowe's age, it was likely he was involved in some way in the fifty-year-old child abuse case. That, and the matter of his cyborg bodyguards' rampage, would leave him facing a lengthy list of charges when he recovered from the transplant. It turned out Lowe was a wealthy man. It took more than deep pockets, however, to deter the Judges of Mega-City One. There was every chance Lowe would spend a great deal of the extra years he had bought himself inside an iso-cube.

Or not.

In the weeks following his transplant procedure, it became clear that irony cut three ways in its dealings with Roderick Lowe. Despite an initially positive prognosis, over time it became apparent something had gone seriously wrong with Lowe's transplant. Whether it was through some unforeseen surgical error, or simply bad luck, Lowe did not regain consciousness. Instead, he remained locked in a permanent vegetative state, trapped inside his new body and unable to communicate. He lived for another fifty-seven years; a drooling basket case, kept alive by machines, with one tube to feed him and another tube to take away his waste. The various charges against him were held on file, but he was not sentenced nor was he ever arrested. Financially, it made little sense for Justice Department to go to the considerable expense of imprisoning a man who was already a prisoner in his own body.

The general consensus was that Lowe had already suffered a fate worse than death. Some even saw it as a sign that Grud really did have a sense of humour.

Still, if the Almighty did indulge in the occasional joke, He liked to play them straight.

For Dr Richard Langstock, the events at the Siegel Medical Centre that day heralded the end of a promising career. Generally, in the years that

followed, he traced the beginning of his misfortunes to a short conversation he had had with Psi-Judge Anderson in the wake of the Lowe transplant.

"You realise there's a reason why Total Body Transplants are so heavily regulated?" Anderson had told him. "Justice Department likes to make sure the body donors are legit and no one is going around murdering people to steal their bodies. I take it all your paperwork is up-to-date?"

"Of course," Langstock had found himself unable to prevent his voice from trembling as he answered her. He was a fine surgeon, but a very poor liar. "We're very careful about these things. I'm sure you'll find everything is in order."

"I'm sure we will," Anderson had smiled at him. "That's why I've ordered there to be a complete audit made of your records for the last ten years. We'll also be sending a couple of Judges from the Accounting Division to take a look at your personal finances. After that, you're booked in for interrogation at your local Sector House. We'll send you to see the Dream Police. PSU have pulled all the records of your recent movements. Who knows, maybe when they're finished with you, they'll send you back to me for a full telepathic probe. That's the thing about Justice Department; we don't like to leave any stone unturned."

In the fullness of time, other matters were resolved. Although Operation Lazarus quietly folded its tents within a few days of its inception, the investigation into the operations of the Organizatsiya and the remains of Konrad Gruschenko's criminal empire continued for years. Over time, arrests were made. Arthur Whittaker, AKA Peter Arkady, tentatively identified as Gruschenko's successor as head of the Organizatsiya, was killed in a shootout with Judges while resisting arrest.

At least, that was the outcome recorded in the Justice Department casebooks. For years afterwards rumours would occasionally surface in the underworld that Arkady had followed the example of his one-time leader, faking his own death so he could resume his criminal activities under a new identity. There were a number of claims made of sightings of him over the years.

The sightings were never confirmed.

As for the decades-old child abuse cases whose existence had been revealed by the discovery of the meme-encoder among the effects of Joseph

Kapinski, they were diligently investigated by the relevant Justice Department divisions. It became clear that Roderick Lowe had been a prime mover in the crimes, alongside a number of other wealthy and distinguished members of Mega-City One's high society - most of whom had long ago succumbed to old age and were, thus, beyond punishment by earthly powers. Arrests were made where they could be, while the now-adult victims of the crimes were offered counselling.

With the investigation completed, the records were filed away. But while it was the end of one particular case, elsewhere in the city children continued to be abused. With the best will in the world, the forces of Law could not be everywhere, nor could they see everything. For every single case of abuse that was brought to light, it was estimated as many as ten went unreported.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

There was one unexpected development, however. The investigation into Roderick Lowe and his associates uncovered evidence linking them with the previously unsolved disappearances of at least thirty-seven children over a period of several decades. A number of sets of human remains were found, all but one of which were eventually claimed by grieving relatives once forensic tests had established the identities of the deceased. The one exception was the skeleton of a young boy, estimated to have been approximately eight years old at the time of his death, which was discovered buried beneath the basement of a derelict factory in Sector 45. Despite exhaustive tests by Teks and Med-Judges, the boy's identity could not be confirmed.

In a curious side-note, it was Judge Anderson who came closest to being able to identify the boy. Once facial reconstruction software had been used to create a computer-generated Tri-D portrait of what the boy might have looked like in life, she realised he bore an uncanny resemblance to the ghostly child she had seen clinging to the mutant giant's shoulders in City Bottom.

Despite this, the boy's name was never discovered. As for the child ghost Anderson had encountered, he was never seen again.

All of which left only the matter of Lenny the mutant.

The mutant had escaped the hospital, but given the fact he was bleeding copiously from the bullet wounds riddling his body, Anderson found his trail easy to follow. In the company of a tac-team, she tracked him across the city. Fleeing the hospital the mutant had hijacked a car, forcing the terrified driver to transport him to a run-down neighbourhood in Sector 43.

By the time Anderson and the others arrived on the scene, Lenny had abandoned the car to make his way on foot to a third-floor apartment in the nearby John Merrick Block. Wary in case a hostage situation developed, the Judges had approached the apartment with caution. Finding the front door open, Anderson was the first one through the doorway into the apartment. Inside, she was greeted by an unexpected sight.

The mutant lay dead on the floor of the living room, his head cradled in the lap of an old woman who knelt crying over him. From the amount of blood on the floor, it was clear the mutant had bled out from his wounds. It must have taken a titanic final effort for him to reach the apartment before he died.

"Lenny!" Not realising the mutant was dead, one of the tac-team Judges levelled his Lawgiver at the corpse and began to bark out orders. "Step away from the woman! Now!"

"Leonard," the old woman corrected him. She smoothed her hand gently over the mutant's hair, as though he was sleeping. Her eyes were red with tears. "His name was Leonard, just like his father. He was my beautiful special boy, but you Judges had to take him away from me. You put me in the cubes. You kept us apart all these years. And now you've killed him. My poor, special little boy."

Her hand continuing to stroke gently at his hair, the woman began to hum a lullaby. In death, the giant's face was peaceful as though he had been where he wanted to be as he breathed his last breath. There was a quiet, contented smile frozen on his lips.

Leonard the giant had found his mother.

THE END

EPILOGUE

FATES, BOTH WORSE THAN DEATH

"She's doing as well as can be expected," the doctor said. He stood by the observation window and drew Anderson's attention to the place in the room beyond where former Psi-Judge Myrna Lang sat staring blankly into space. "The bullet did a lot of damage to her frontal lobes. Her memory is gone, as are most of her higher brain functions and her personality. But her motor skills are largely unimpaired. Naturally, she's having to re-learn everything all over again. Right now, she's a blank slate. But, given enough time and patience, we should be able to teach her to eat, wash, even dress herself on her own again."

"Are those her parents?" Anderson asked. A door inside the room opened as a middle-aged man and woman entered it. Noticing them as they approached her, Lang smiled.

"Yes, they come here every day," the doctor nodded. "It's strange really, but they seem to be the only people she remembers."

Inside the room, the woman had produced a spoon and a jar of baby food from inside her purse. Sitting down to face her daughter, she began to feed her.

"I was surprised when Psi Division allowed her to be transferred to our facility," the doctor said. "I thought Psi-Judges who were too badly injured to continue their duties had to stay inside Omar House."

"Not in this case," Anderson shook her head sadly. "The damage to her brain destroyed her psychic powers. There was no reason to make her stay in Omar."

Watching as Lang's mother continued to carefully feed her daughter, Anderson wondered if Lang hadn't been given exactly what she wanted. Lang had hated her psychic powers, resenting the fact their presence had caused her to be taken away from her family. Now, Lang's powers were gone and she was with her family again. In some ways it was as though the clock had been turned back: as though Lang had returned to her childhood. She wondered if, given the choice while she had still been in possession of her full faculties, Lang would have accepted this as her only way out of Psi Division. Personally, she found it hard to believe anyone would choose to

have this kind of thing done to them. To be robbed of your reason, reduced to little more than an infant: to Anderson it seemed a fate worse than death.

Mercifully, however, and for better or worse, Lang no longer seemed able to realise what she had lost.

Trapped inside his own body, Roderick Lowe was screaming.

He screamed continually, desperate to make himself heard. He was vaguely aware of his surroundings. He knew he was in a hospital bed, his body wired to a variety of tubes and machines. But, no matter how hard he screamed, no one could hear him.

No one except the boy.

That was the worst of it. Bad enough to be trapped, unable to move, inside the prison of your own flesh. But Roderick Lowe was not alone. There was another mind in his body with him. A mind set on vengeance.

They can't hear you, the boy whispered to him in an eerie sing-song voice. *You can scream all you like, Mr Lowe. No one will do anything about it. No one even knows we are in here. There's just you and me. You and me. Do you remember when you hurt me, Mr Lowe? Do you remember when you killed me? You're a bad man. And bad men should be punished*.

Abruptly, the character of Roderick Lowe's screams changed as agony coursed through him. The boy seemed to have the power to inflict pain on him whenever he wanted. He tortured him constantly, minute by minute, hour by hour, inflicted torments far worse than any human idea of Hell. And, all the while, Lowe was helpless; he was a puppet to the boy's will.

You're a bad man, the boy said. *And you need to be punished. You need to find out what it's like to have other people hurt you when you can't do anything about it. That's why I decided to come in here with you when I saw you at the hospital. I knew I'd be happy in here. I knew I could punish you as much as I want, and as long as I want. For as long as I want, Mr Lowe. We've got all the time in the world*.

The pain began again, like a thousand hot stabbing needles all at once. Then, it changed, become a sensation of fear and suffocation. It changed again, the pain of being gouged by ten thousand razors. The nature of the pain changed with every second, giving him no time to grow used to it. The boy was an artist of pain, with a vast repertoire of fresh agonies forever at his fingertips.

Trapped in his own body, Roderick Lowe was screaming.

While, trapped in there with him, Daniel listened to the sound and smiled.

Mitchel Scanlon lives in Derbyshire, England and is a full-time writer. He has written both comic books and prose fiction. He also wrote the first two Anderson PSI Division novels, as well as *Fifteen Hours* for the Black Library. *Sins of the Father* is his fourth novel.